

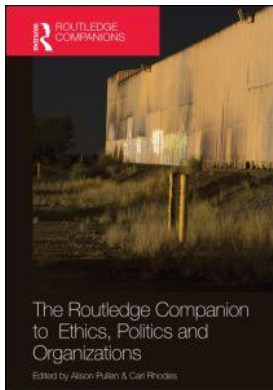
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## **The Routledge Companion to Ethics, Politics and Organizations**

Alison Pullen, Carl Rhodes

### **On the impossibility of business ethics**

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Gerard Hanlon, Matteo Mandarini

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# On the impossibility of business ethics

## Leadership, heterogeneity and politics

*Gerard Hanlon and Matteo Mandarinì*

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The problem with business ethics is that it is *business* ethics; that is to say, it seeks to remove the politics of the working class and install what we, following David Harvey, will call the ‘restoration’ of (ruling) class power – and, hence, the concomitant reinforcement of capitalist social relations as ‘natural’.<sup>1</sup> Thus, before you can get to ethics you must deal with *business* and business always aims to be organized from above, to be top down, to seek individualization or acquiescent aggregated units, to enable some (and not others) to set the tone, to lead, to be reasonable; and the prioritization of business is advanced by the turn *to* ethics, an ethics understood as the self-regulation of the individual, a responsabilization of the individual according to values drawn from above and interjected *to* and *away* from a politics from below. This ‘from above’ is true for all the essential elements of business: the state, the market or the work organization. In what follows we will argue that business ethics’ emphasis on the ethical is largely about its desire to limit, to stifle and contain the formation of a certain *homogeneity* of interests, which are formed and self-organized in the struggle of the collective working subject; it is a desire, in short, for the excision of the antagonistic political subject – the worker – upon which business depends but which it must subordinate.

Overturing some of the contemporary championing of heterogeneity, difference or autonomy, we shall argue that what we see here is the attempt to replace ‘political’ homogeneity and collective control with ‘ethical’ heterogeneity and elite leadership. Unfortunately for business ethics, to achieve what many progressives would seek from it, it would have to do that which it cannot openly do – embrace the collective, the political. This it cannot do precisely because it is itself formed politically and collectively as a *reaction* to the working class but is itself also divided by the necessity of its own individual competition and intra-class fractionation (van der Pijl, 2012).<sup>2</sup> By the ‘political’ we mean the capacity for a social grouping or class to create the future in such a way as to advance the collective values developed in its struggle. We will see, therefore, that on the side of the working class, political growth is a tendential development of class solidarity – the creation of a ‘social mass without divisions’ of interests (Tronti, 1963: 292); whereas the class solidarity of the ruling class is always reactive to the level of unity of the working class and always threatened by its own fractioning into different interests – divided

between different owners of capital in competition, or between different functions of capital (as in commercial, money and productive capital) in competition or in positions of relative dominance or subordination (van der Pijl, 2012). We shall return to this through a discussion of the analyses by the Italian Workerist, Mario Tronti, and later in the conclusion. In our rendering business ethics is the opposite of this. It is the creation of division, of heterogeneity, of market aggregates, of individualization, of fragmentation via the state, the market, or the organization. It is part of the soft (and not so soft) technologies of regulation. It demands that individual workers adopt and implement an ethics from above, to self-regulate in accordance with the interests of capital. Unsurprisingly, calls for business ethics grow during periods of class transformation – such as the present – because capital uses it to forestall the further potential homogenization of labour that is possible during phases of recomposition.

Our proposition – a seeming call for uniformity – rubs the contemporary cloth the wrong way. So why make this call? Following the Workerist tradition in Marxism we will argue that contrary to the worldview from above, it is the working class that drives progress and that this class, rather than the bourgeoisie, is the engine of inclusive change; and it is able to do this *because* tendentially it is unity-in-action, with – if you like – an ethics, but we prefer, a political practice, formed from below in the course of struggle. This again seems counter-intuitive to the times. Even Marxists such as Harry Braverman (1974) suggested the worker's role was largely one of resistance – a responder to, and shaper of, but not the instigator of, change. In this case capital or management rather than labour is the creator of tomorrow – one admittedly modified and made more progressive by labour's resistance. In contrast we will argue that labour not capital, politics not ethics, homogeneity not heterogeneity are the forces of innovation, creators of a better tomorrow.

What follows is divided into six sections. The first of which is a brief contemporary and historic account of the ethics of restoration in management – perhaps better, in leadership. The second section then looks at the work of Mario Tronti and others to argue that working-class homogenization lies at the heart of capitalism's 'progress' and the formation of the bourgeoisie as a class, and that it is this class's soft and hard technologies of regulation that are at the base of its attempts to create heterogeneity – that is, at its attempt at the *restoration* of its own position in light of the political power of the working class. The chapter then moves into a section entitled 'ethical management, homogeneity and heterogeneity in the steel mill' to locate Tronti's conceptualization of the relations between labour and capital. It does this by examining an industry at the very heart of the formation of the modern corporation – the form that is to deliver contemporary business ethics – to expose its incomplete attempt to steal labour's knowledge, its attempt to create labour homogeneity, capital's reactive rather than proactive quality, and capital's use of ethics (and other tactics) to attempt to intervene and shape workers' class reproduction. From this section we then go back in time to use F. W. Taylor as an illustration of management ethics; the following section pulls these strands together to examine the spillage of these issues of homogeneity and heterogeneity beyond the factory to the whole of society as the political power of the working class forces capitalists to respond on an ever larger scale and themselves to homogenize as a class in light of labour's potentiality. We will then conclude to say something about the issue of business ethics in the contemporary economy.

## The ethics of business

It is obvious that business has its own ethics. Ethics in this regard is a seeming retreat from politics whilst in actuality it is used to surreptitiously sneak in a *counter-politics*, what can perhaps

usefully be framed as a process and struggle for *restoration*, a re-appropriation of the dynamic of change in terms that perpetually re-establish forms of authority. At its heart is the proliferation and simultaneous circumscribing of responsibility and decision making. This is often done in the name of opportunity, individualization, liberation, choice or responsibility. As Boris Johnson, Lord Mayor of London, expressed it in his 2013 Margaret Thatcher Lecture:

It seems to me that though it would be wrong to persecute the rich, and madness to try and stifle wealth creation, and futile to stamp out inequality, we should only tolerate this wealth gap on two conditions. One, that we help those who genuinely cannot compete; and two, that we provide opportunity for those who can.

Such moral views have a long history in business ethics. The influential Dean of Harvard Business School, Wallace Donham (1927a: 401), forcefully argued for the moral role of management. It was the managerial elite that would secure the ‘orderly evolution of society’. In the same issue of the *Harvard Business Review* he commented ‘it [to create socially minded business men] is one of the great problems of civilization, for such men can do more than any other type to rehabilitate the ethical and social forces of the community and to create the background which is essential to a more idealistic working philosophy in the community’ (1927b: 406). Famously, Taylor (House of Representatives, 1912) argued in front of the Special House Committee that his was an ethical and leadership agenda. His prescriptions for work would also ensure an ethical and orderly evolution. And Elton Mayo (1933, 1949) argued it was management’s ethical and moral duty to habituate the ‘irrational’ worker to the new society. Thus the need for ethics in business has a long history of being recognized by business itself and central to this recognition is the leadership and moral role of business.

We can see, then, that business ethics sets for itself the classical question of political philosophy – how do we create the ‘good society’? The question is whether business ethics is able to provide the answer? In this chapter we will argue the reply must be no because the good society envisioned and pursued in business ethics is one that reinforces a particular social and economic structure of command, that is top down and regressive; it seeks to generate heterogeneity and break up homogeneity, it aims to individualize or aggregate but not to collectivize – in short, it reinforces hierarchy and destroys equality. The reason for this is simple; the business elite is itself caught up in a fundamental and inescapable ambiguity: it is a collective only insofar as it is threatened and fears its workers; hence its political project is to keep those workers in a fragmented, individuated state unable to exist as a collective, other than as a pacified aggregation of individuals; at the same time, the business elite is in conflict with itself as a collective, for its material interests are internally riven, for each ‘leader’ prospers in conflict, in competition with its rivals. For these reasons, the business elite is eminently unsuited to providing political ‘leadership’ in practice or of portraying the image of the ‘good society’ in theory. These fundamental features to the ethical in business mean that, as with the centralizing of the individual confessional in human resource management (Townley, 1993), or the return and rise of transformational leadership (Du Gay, 2000), or calls for creativity and expression at work (Brouillette, 2014), or the renewed emphasis on entrepreneurship as liberating (Hanlon, 2014); business ethics must also be seen not as a way of reforming management or business but simply as another ‘technology of regulation’ (Thompson and McHugh, 2009: 312). Business ethics, corporate social responsibility or any derivative thereof will not liberate because they always come from above and are ultimately *for* the above in that they prevent the common production of values, practices and organization.

## The politics of homogeneity and restoration

In this section we will outline the theoretical framework of the analysis we are setting to work here, through a discussion of the earlier examination of worker organizing in the 1960s. We will see how this is explicitly framed in terms of a homogeneity of interests and in contrast to the fragmentation that class elites bring to bear upon that emerging unity.

Mario Tronti famously argues that at the level of ‘socially developed capital, capitalist development is subordinated to workers’ struggles, it comes after them and it must make the political mechanism of its production correspond to it’ (Tronti, 1964: 89). This has been described as the ‘Copernican Revolution’ that characterizes *Operaismo* (Trotta and Milana, 2008), and it remains undoubtedly that for which this heretical Marxist tradition is famed. What he meant by it is that while typically – even in the Marxist tradition – it is the analysis of capital that explains the supposed antagonist to capital, i.e. the working class, for Tronti it is the other way around. One must start from the working class (Tronti, 1963: 291), a working class that was not to be understood *sociologically* (or not *only* sociologically), but that it was immediately collective and, hence, *political*. This can be understood partly as the effect of the concentration and quantitative extension of the working class following from the development of industry; but to remain at this level would be to remain at a level of a ‘vulgar’, determinist, economistic Marxism. The most important argument he makes is that there is no bourgeois class *at all* without a working class. But on what basis can he make such a counter-intuitive claim? How can one have a working class without the class of owners of capital, i.e. of the employers of the working class? His argument is developed through a critique of the notion of ‘bourgeois revolution’: he argues that the bourgeois revolution is nothing but the ‘sanction of a process that has already taken place’ (Tronti, 1963: 292). What he means by this is that it is merely the political confirmation of economic power having passed from the landed aristocracy to the new, rising, bourgeois class. For this reason, it is not possible to model the revolutionary rupture of the working class on that of the bourgeoisie. Unlike the case of the bourgeoisie, the growth of the working class within the capitalist mode of production is not the growth of *economic* power of the class (as was the growth of a merchant class for instance under absolutism and of agrarian capital within Britain); nor is it the growth in strength and autonomy of labour power. It is the expansion of the immediately *political* power of the class: ‘the growth of the working class within the economic system of capital posits itself as political growth’ (ibid.). But what is this ‘political growth’? Of what is it composed and how does it reveal itself?

Tronti explains this ‘political growth’ in terms of the growth of ‘class solidarity’ following from, but irreducible to, the socialization of production, of the production in short of a ‘social mass without internal divisions’. Six months after this declaration, in the opening editorial of the journal *Classe Operaia*, ‘Lenin in England’, he speaks of how: ‘historically, workers’ labour power is born homogenous on the international political plane and it forces capital over a lengthy historical period to become equally homogenous’ (Tronti, 1964: 90). It is what he also calls the ‘*unity of movement* of the working class at the world level’, which in turn imposes upon capital ‘a rapid [attempt to] salvage a unified response’ (ibid.). Such a response comes in the form of a process of unification, i.e. a homogenization of the capitalist class, but it is driven *reactively* on the basis of the fear of the homogeneity, the political growth, of the working class. In order to fully grasp this idea, one must be careful to distinguish the bourgeois from the capitalist. That is, one must differentiate between *individual* capitalists and capitalists *as a class*, which he terms the bourgeoisie. In that sense the priority of the working class to the bourgeoisie is not perhaps quite as paradoxical as it might first appear; for one begins with the *individual* capitalist *without* the bourgeoisie, i.e. without *political unification*: what we have initially is the relation of

'individual capitalist – mass of workers' (Tronti, 1963: 197). That is, each individual capitalist is confronted with a mass of workers that he employs, and he himself confronts other individual capitalists in a competitive relation, the 'anarchy of competition' (Marx, 1981: 369). However, at a certain point of capitalist development, of the socialization of capital (and of the growth of the working class as a political subject), the capitalists must organize themselves *as a class*, the bourgeoisie, in order to confront the *political unity* and *homogeneity* of the working class (Tronti, 1963: 294); for the working class is always already collective: there is no single worker; workers only exist in the plural, as a 'social fact' (Tronti, 1963: 298). Their political character is nothing other than their 'sociality': the 'absolute absence of internal divisions to the class, so that workers are all born with the same interests'. Hence, while individual capitalists lie behind the emergence of a unified working class, it is the unified working class that lies behind the emergence of the bourgeoisie (and, incidentally, the reason why there is no such thing as a bourgeois revolution).

Let us reflect a moment on this purported (or imputed) homogeneity of the class. What can it mean to claim that the working class is homogeneous on the national and on the international level? To take an example, the development of the technological fix of Fordism (Silver, 2003) means that production of automobiles in Turin, Detroit or Dagenham, or indeed, Tangier, Pretoria or Delhi look increasingly similar despite their separate histories. Is this hard to maintain? What exactly are we to understand by Tronti's claim? It is this: the spread of the technologies of the assembly line from the USA, has the effect of reconfiguring the working class in whichever situation it finds itself; for the machinery of Fordism is indifferent to social, cultural conditions, doing away with the skills of individual workers and the internal differentiations of the class that this led to, but more than this, it redraws the whole of society on the model of the Fordist factory (as Gramsci, 1971: 277–317, famously highlighted in his essay *Americanism and Fordism*). This means that not only are the structures within which the working class – the 'mass worker' – live unified by capital, but the working class does not have any autonomous, independent standpoint drawn from 'outside' the factory; no ground, culture untouched by capital. For this reason Tronti feels justified in declaring the industrial working class to be born unified, homogenized, with needs, desires, interests circumscribed by the dissemination – due to the dynamics of capitalist competition – of Fordist production technologies. Whether you are in Detroit or in Tangier, the 'capitalist use of machinery' (Panzieri, 1961) remains what it is, and workers are constrained by its operations; the pace and rhythms of life are dictated by those of the machine. One can see this in the similarity of struggle the automobile industry encountered as it traversed the globe seeking to avoid its own industrial relations (see Silver, 2003).

The question for what – in a somewhat more contemporary language – we have been calling the business elite, is how does it intervene to break up this threatening homogeneity of interests? What forms does that attack take and what ends does it have? Our argument is that *one* of the forms of this attack is through the dissemination of business ethics as a tool to segment and fragment that homogeneity by imposing a top-down framework for action and responsabilization (individuation) of workers, separating them off from their colleagues.<sup>3</sup> The end is to replace a *politics* from below with *restoration* from above, maintaining hierarchies and lines of command firmly in place through an evacuation of representative political organs (Mair, 2013). Using such an analysis allows us to better explain business ethics.

In the section to come we examine these issues through a crucial industry – steel. The modern steel industry and the modern corporation emerge out of the capitalist struggle with labour homogeneity. As we shall argue, it is precisely at the time of labour's transition from a craft elite to a large homogeneous mass industrial class with political power, that capital seeks to increase heterogeneity through career paths, management cadres, technology, race and ethnicity,

and individualization. Thus fragmentation works at two levels: in the labour process itself where it actually intensifies labour's homogeneity and in what today might be called soft technologies of control, where it seeks to create heterogeneity. These contradictory fragmentations are at the centre of capital's ethical project in steel.

### **Ethical management, homogeneity and heterogeneity in the steel mill**

This section examines the emergence of what Edwards (1979) called bureaucratic control – a management form that dominated the twentieth century. This is a lineage of increasing working-class homogenization and hence political power despite managerial attempts to create heterogeneity. We will analyse this via the destruction of craftwork and an older, seemingly natural order of production within the steel industry – the industry most closely associated with Taylor (who we look at in the next section). Katherine Stone (1973) describes how the factory altered post-1890. She suggests the modern factory form developed out of the struggles at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries. Her work describes an organizational structure that came to last for almost a century. Unsurprisingly key here was the transfer of the knowledge of the production process from workers to management, the growth of the semi-skilled worker, the development of internal labour markets, the new importance of promotion and spurious career paths, the increased use of technology, the rise of the problem of motivation, the attempted individualizing of the workplace, and the increased use of formal education to hire new management cadres. In different ways all of these developments were managerial attempts to create heterogeneity in light of the growing worker homogeneity that Tronti highlights – to generate ethics against politics. The struggle over the steel industry between 1890 and 1920 is perhaps one of the most important site where this modern factory and modern business ethics were founded.

In 1860 the US steel industry employed 748 men in 13 establishments, by 1901 US Steel was the first billion-dollar corporation, and in 1919 the steel industry employed half a million workers, 50 per cent of whom were on strike – a truly remarkable period of change (Stone, 1973: 21; Brody, 1965: 113). In achieving this change, the industry had to destroy the traditional craft pattern of working because craft labour refused large elements of the capitalist work process and continued to see management not as productive or ethical but as unwarranted policing. Craftwork essentially brought capital and labour together as 'equal' partners (Montgomery, 1987). For example, skilled craftworkers were paid on a 'sliding scale' by the tonnage produced; wages were tied not to local wage rates but to the market price of steel; firms contracted with the craftsmen who then organized the production process and hired the unskilled labour – capital did not confront labour as the organizer of production let alone did it have a claim to some form of ethical leadership or wealth creation. Craftworkers controlled hiring, the pace of work, training and apprenticeship, the pay rates for different grades and trades, the allocation of tasks, the productivity of the individual, product quality, and the proportion of scrap used in running a furnace. The craftworker understood and organized the entire productive cycle of productive capital. Labour controlled production and because its wages were tied to the market price of steel the employer could not use them as an incentive or to discipline or to intensify work (Stone, 1973: 21–25; Montgomery, 1987: 9–57).

Here worker knowledge ensured worker refusal because authority and social mobility came from skill and know-how not capital. In the 'Artisan Republic' (Wilentz, 2004) craftworkers were socialized into work and life as apprentices and journeymen, they shared knowledge, built robust social organizations, imbibed ways of living, had firm beliefs about how work should be

organized and managed, had strong views about the role of work within craft life, and were at the top of a labour hierarchy that appeared natural (Wilentz, 2004; Montgomery, 1987; Mills, 1951). The distinction that emerged later between work and life did not exist for these workers. A cooperative and shared sociality was the foundation stone of craftwork. Importantly, this antagonism to capital was not anti-market per se (Perrow, 2002), rather it was rooted in the notion of autonomy and in the idea that one identified with one's occupation or craft rather than one's class in the modern sense (see Stedman-Jones, 1974; Weber, 1994: 272–303).

Sellers (1991) argues that the defining traits of early nineteenth-century American life were the belief in the virtue of working people; the centrality of individual/familial independence or autonomy; the very cautious embrace of market forces; and the suspicion of elites, the corporate form and an expanding state. These concerns shaped Jacksonian America. What they symbolized was a desire for economic independence so that the political subject was free from undue influence at the ballot box and in political life more generally (Brown, 1972). For working people, autonomy was found in land and craft skill and it allowed them to resist those who would put 'self-interest' before the 'public good'. Success was not simply measured by wealth. Central to success was not being beholden to others by being independent.<sup>4</sup> By avoiding the travails of the working people of Europe or the slaves of the south (Foner, 1995), a working (white) craftworker could be virtuous and autonomous rather than be a mere obliged servant to a parasitic and aristocratic elite (Perrow, 2002: 22–47). Foner (1995: xii) suggests 'Not only personal dependence, as in the case of a domestic servant, but working for wages itself were widely seen as disreputable.' Thus craftworkers had a (limited) solidarity that was wary of hierarchy even though it was itself hierarchical. This hierarchy ultimately was flawed because it condemned the increasingly more numerous operatives and semi-skilled workers to a 'working-class unity under the hegemony of skilled craftsmen' (Montgomery, 1987: 46; Nelson, 1995: 79–98) and, as such, it was becoming ever more anachronistic. Craftworkers believed that capital and the corporation would create or cement the elite who would destroy a better society and them.

An important element of this belief was that capitalists expropriate some of the value craftworkers create and that capital was something of a thief. Here, there is an inherent conflict between workers and capital. For early nineteenth-century craftworkers this seemed obvious and natural. They had traditionally produced goods on demand in small groups for which they charged a book price based on the labour time involved. As apprentices and journeymen, they expected to pay a surplus to the master by way of learning their craft but, upon achieving master status, they expected to reap the full and just reward of their labour. The authority for paying this subsidy was located in the master's superior knowledge, experience and his or her role as a trainer of the next generation. This (often strict) authority was necessarily social not individualistic – the master craftsman used his knowledge of the social individual – that is knowledge handed down to and then developed by him or her – to assert authority (Nelson, 1995: 35–55). In 1830s New York (Wilentz, 2004: 240–245), craftworkers argued that their craft was a property and not an alienable commodity. It was inalienably part of the worker – indeed the occupational community – and, as such, should not be subject to expropriation by capitalist/masters because the craftsperson should retain its full value rather than earn mere wages. Craft knowledge and the collective trumped capital – UK craftworkers exhibited similar beliefs (see Hodgskin, 1825). Here very explicitly this craft hierarchy rejected capital or management's ethical leadership and hence it had to be traduced.

As is well documented, the craft way of production was about to change. In steel during the 1880s demand grew due to railway building, amongst other things, and the USA, Britain and Germany increasingly competed on the world market. However, because of labour's control of the production process, capitalists and management could not easily increase production to



meet this demand nor could they easily drive down costs in order to steal a march on the competition. Craft's power meant it could resist attempts to lower wages or increase work. Craft labour could largely control its own social reproduction. Because of this, labour costs as a proportion of total revenues were rising (Stone, 1973: 24–26) – anathema to capitalists.

Management reacted to this power and knowledge through, amongst other things, the infamous Homestead strike (Montgomery, 1987). The bitter strike led to a restructuring of the steel industry and ended the previous relations between capital and labour. Between 1892 and 1898 the membership of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin workers declined from 25,000 to 10,000 (Stone, 1973: 28). Over the next 30 years the industry was radically transformed through a minute division of labour and ethical leadership. The purpose of this conflict was to destroy the craftworker as an organizing force of production and, hence, potentially as a vanguard of the emerging industrial working class. Management proceeded to do this via deskilling and technology but, in so doing, one side-effect of this was the emergence of ever greater labour political power through homogenization (in the later form of the mass worker of Fordism). This in turn led to ever more monopoly, collusion and class formation amongst (steel) capitalists thereby further solidifying the bourgeoisie as a class – this was partly done under the leadership of J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Frick, Charles Schwab and Elbert Gary. For example, during the strike-filled years post-First World War, these capitalists often met together to forge an agreed response to labour (Gitelman, 1988: 305–330) or they formed into groups such as the Employers Association of Detroit which had files on 16,000 workers in 1904 but had a full 180,000 files eight years later in a joint employer effort to enforce an open shop, intimidate labour and blacklist union organizers (Nelson, 1995: 129) – that is to solidify themselves as a class and to sacrifice the interests of the individual competitive capitalist to those of the bourgeoisie as a whole, a graphic illustration of Tronti's point above.

In this period management attempted to fulfil three aims: one, the development of new technology to alter production processes and job structures; two, through these new job structures it created the new problems and solutions of motivating and disciplining the labour force; and three, ethical management established a lasting, if incomplete and contested, control over the entire labour process. In so doing, the steel industry accepted costs, new problems, new management layers, and it restructured work to undermine the 'natural' order and hierarchy of craft. Furthermore through the creation of extended career paths, meaningless grades, promotion opportunities, selection and recruitment processes, and the piece rate it sought to create ever more heterogeneity amongst the emerging work processes and workforce in order to counteract the intensifying homogeneity. It attacked this order and any of its forms of knowledge wherever it could – the original knowledge worker was to be eradicated and/or reduced by the business ethics of the day. Furthermore the new division of labour would allow for a college- or university-trained elite-led management (Mills, 1951: 77–111; Weber, 1994). What emerges from this is something like what we know as the bureaucratic organizational form (Mills, 1951; Edwards, 1979).

The defeat of the Homestead strike signalled only the start to a systematic undermining of craft. Ethical management used the period after the strike to engage in a class struggle for knowledge of the production process. This culminated with the transfer of knowledge from workers to management in ways outlined by Taylor (see next section). Capitalist technology was used to weaken skilled workers, reduce unskilled work and avail of more semi-skilled workers. The labour force was recomposed (as was the working class as a whole). From 1890 to 1910 the total labour force grew by 129 per cent. However, native-born skilled white workers only grew by 55 per cent and immigrants from Germany and the British Isles declined by 18 per cent. In contrast, Afro-Americans grew by 165 per cent. Most remarkably, Southern and Eastern

Europeans grew by 227 per cent so by 1910 they were nearly half the labour force (Montgomery, 1987: 42). Importantly this example highlights the manner in which the foundations for the new mass industrial worker were laid. Here a small collectivity was replaced by an increasingly larger one that defined itself not as an occupation or a craft but a class. This class was more and more drawn towards the creation of industrial unions made up of skilled and unskilled workers, men and women, English speakers and others, and natives and immigrants (Nelson, 1995: 126) – the political power of which both reshaped capitalism and forced capital to become increasingly large scale in order to respond to this power (see section entitled ‘homogeneity and heterogeneity beyond steel’).

These changes meant workers were increasingly homogenized despite the growing numbers of grades, promotions or layers of service that management introduced (Stone, 1973). Hence workers experienced collective grievances and saw themselves as a class; that is, where capitalist restructuring aimed to break the previous level of worker homogeneity and political composition, it did so only at the cost of raising the level of homogeneity and encouraging new and ‘inappropriate’ ways to collectivize. As Taylor (1903: 1440) – who argued for the simultaneous standardizing and individualizing of workers – commented:

When employers herd their men together in classes, pay all of each class the same wages, and offer none of them any inducements to work harder or do better than the average, the only remedy for the men lies in combination; and frequently the only possible answer to encroachments on the part of their employers is a strike.

The solution proposed by ethical management was to create a process of heterogeneity in the name of the bourgeois values such as fairness and ambition. As we will see, management used the piece rate and created internal labour markets with elongated promotion ladders designed to stoke desire, to develop certain potentialities and to entrench a world of competitive individualism (see Taylor, 1903: 1415, who discusses something like an emergent internal labour market). The bureaucratic career was born. Such tactics were deliberately designed to create competition between workers and to foster ideas of bourgeois progress, ambition, individualization, meritocracy and fairness in workers. These systems were simultaneously about heterogeneity, discipline, standardization, individualization and ethics. Ethical-led management was to lead us to what Edwards (1979) called the totalitarian organization. Although highly effective, these mechanisms operate principally at the level of social reproduction through different means of remuneration and through the institutionalization of artificial hierarchies within the productive process but they could not entirely disguise the fundamental equality or the homogenization of conditions within the process of production itself.

### **The ethics of early management thought in F. W. Taylor**

As we saw, the steel industry is one of the industries central to the growing homogenization of labour and the implementation of management techniques to disrupt this homogeneity. In this sense, worker homogeneity drives forward the issue of equality and diversity so beloved of modern management. Management was perhaps the original advocate of this. In this sense, management advocated equality through the equalization of work processes and conditions but it then sought to implement diversity of treatment on the basis of spurious skill differences, elongated career paths, amenability to management diktat and individualization. One can see this in the emergence of scientific management. At the centre of Taylor’s work – perhaps the first management theorist – is the ethical language of diversity. His obsession with natural and

systematic soldiering reflects this ethics. Labour's solidarity in the workplace, its homogeneity, led it to limit the rate at which it worked and hence made it unethical in Taylor's view. By fragmenting workers through deskilling and the introduction of individualized pay and piece rates, heterogeneity could be successfully inculcated in the name of fairness for the *individual* worker and the employer. Bourgeois equality and diversity are centre stage in the piece rate because it reflected 'an exact measure of the intensity of labour. Only labour-time which is embodied in the quantity of commodities laid down in advance and fixed by experience counts as socially necessary labour-time and is paid as such' (Marx, 1976: 694). The piece rate was designed to reshape the whole work relationship because, as the Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics put it, it was 'a moral force which corresponds to machinery as a physical force' (see Gutman, 1973: 565). Speaking of this ethics, Marx (1976: 692–700) showed how the piece rate is directly political because it individualizes and intensifies work by pitting one worker against another and leaving knowledge in the control of capital. The piece rate enables the presentation of the speeding up of work, extending the working day or of reducing the rate as being in the interests of the workers themselves. Taylor presented it as the reforming of management *and* labour – as an ethical proposition.

Thus piece rates are a way of comparing and contrasting, of rewarding and chastising, of simultaneously individualizing and standardizing the worker, introducing equality and diversity through pay. Just like Boris Johnson, Taylor is teeing up the twin ethics of 'hard work pays' and each 'gets their just deserts' in the free exchange of talent and money between labour and capital. All of which should, of course, be overseen by 'first class men' (Taylor, 1903: 1362). Here, even if they initially resist, workers will eventually see that management is in their best interest and hence they will embrace this progress; it acts with the force of the moral example, of the moral imperative. As Taylor (1903: 1412) put it:

At first workmen cannot see why, if they do twice as much work as they had done, they should not receive twice the wages. When the matter is properly explained to them and they have time to think it over, they will see that in most cases the increase in output is quite as much due to the improved appliances and methods, to the maintenance of standards and to the great help which they receive from the men over them as to their own harder work and they will realize that the company must pay for the introduction of the improved system, which costs sometimes thousands of dollars and also the salaries of the additional foremen and of the clerks etc. in the planning room as well as tool room and other expenses, and that, in addition, the company is entitled to an increase profit as much as they are.

After management's intervention from above workers come to see their real interests reflected in those of management, and introject these as being in their own self-interest. A second 'ethical' move is also to be found in this management procedure. Taylor introduces new layers of control, destroys the self-organization of workers' production and introduces new costs whilst simultaneously arguing management is productive (Montgomery, 1987: 227). Thus for Taylor ethical management becomes productive rather than 'mere superintendence' (Pollard, 1965: 250; Wilentz, 2004). Taylor's managers now 'create' wealth by leading and controlling labour. There is yet a further benefit. Organizing production becomes an attribute of capital and managerialist leadership rather than of labour. Leadership is management's duty and hence its responsibility and labour should honour its superiors. Taylor advocated for new organizational cultures and a 'mental revolution' – we might even call it a moral one – on the part of both workers and managers but within a structure which management leadership would create (Taylor, 1919: 48). Ethics, organizations, hierarchies and elitism combined. So how did Taylor's ethical management

and leadership attempt to create fragmentation? One way in which it did so was through a systematic endeavour to break the platforms of solidarity at work. As we saw in the steel industry, these platforms were redolent of a 'natural' order of master and apprentice but also one wherein knowledge was held by labour not by the capitalist and, as such, it was an order that could and did resist the hierarchy of capitalism in preference to a hierarchy of its own making. This is what capital could not accept. Capital attempted to call a halt to this 'natural' moral order by breaking down its hierarchies and stripping the craftworker of knowledge – in so doing, it created homogeneity.

### **Homogeneity and heterogeneity beyond steel – from factory to society**

Post Taylor and the Homestead strike, steel firms began to develop new forms of skilled work thereby generating further heterogeneity. This new skill was firm specific and developed through short courses or company training. Workers were not allowed to claim a general knowledge of the production process because to do so would lead to real worker empowerment (Stone, 1973). If management was to be the ethical and organizing force of production, to enforce the new division of labour and the new hierarchy which this brought about, then general knowledge of production had to be denied to workers because they could not be trusted with such knowledge. General knowledge was to remain firmly located with those destined to lead and ethics were used not to empower but to produce forms of self-regulation.

By 1920, new managers were hired from outside the steel firms – these were increasingly taken from formal education institutions (Jacques, 1996: 124–134). These new formally educated management cadres had already been inculcated with the 'virtues' of individualism, competition, ambition, meritocracy – living examples of the heterogeneity management wanted to instil (Mills, 1951; Reisman, 2001; Kracauer, 1998). According to Weber (1994: 292–294), these new managers were increasing rapidly and were a new type of *estate* opposed to the working class. He suggested it was this group that was central to the rising 'dictatorship of the official'. In essence they were generally new to the industry and already middle class or nascent middle class in ambition (Stone, 1973).

What Stone (1973) describes is the emergence of the bureaucratic or monopoly capitalist corporation. Increasingly corporations were made up of semi-skilled workers; management controlled the knowledge of production and used this power to reduce autonomy in the factory. Worker motivation and discipline became key issues. Management was tied further and further to the formal education system and from there to class struggle in that these new employees were often deliberately chosen because they would not share the solidarities of those under them; worker training was increasingly in specific rather than general areas. Despite intensified attempts to create heterogeneity, an increasingly Tronti-like homogeneous working class emerged. All this was done under the watch of management's ethical leadership; but workers continued to reject management's ethics and heterogeneity. As we shall see, this is perhaps most obvious in the growth and importance of the sit-down strike. This strike form spread like a virus in the 1920s and 1930s – from Italy to France to the USA and it reflected the intensifying homogeneity and political power of the working class despite the ethics of heterogeneity.

This threat of homogeneity led capital to respond to the working class with a combination of social repression and technological restructuring that shattered those organizational forms by 'destroying the key role of the professional [skilled] worker'<sup>5</sup> (Negri, 1988: 109). The aim of this reaction was to undermine the possibility that workers could appropriate the technical means of production and thereby link economic demands to political ones. Taylorism and later Fordism

were designed to block this linking between the technical composition of work and the capacity for 'subversive' political action. One can see elements of this in the reaction of craftworkers to Taylorism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when they were at their most militant, and where employers had to redefine the relationship between them and operatives (Montgomery, 1987: 130–131). Or one can see it in the national industry-wide agreements which were formed from the 1890s onwards between the employers and the National Brotherhood of Operative Potters (a union of skilled and unskilled workers) in a bid, as the employers saw it, to plan and stabilize costs (Nelson, 1995: 128). But it was Keynes, coming later, who saw that the emerging productive base would both make the socialization of production increasingly central and create a growing, already large, and homogeneous working class which would recompose the nature of society unless one could intervene with this class's own recomposition; this became management's ethical and economic duty.

Keynes highlighted the manner in which the overproduction unleashed by the new productive forces following the conversion of wartime industrial production to peacetime, alongside the lack of a comparable growth in remuneration and hence consumption were at the heart of the Great Crash. Furthermore, he noted that when overproduction was accompanied by investment capital without productive investment opportunities a liquidity preference and hence speculation would follow. In this world, the state needed to intervene in consumption through wage policies and the control of monetary flow. In short, this would mark the end of the liberal state because capital required – needed – to plan on an increasingly larger plane to manage labour's political growth. Having rejected state intervention, it was now obliged to seek it out; e.g. during the First World War, President Wilson actively enlisted labour's help and believed the trade unions would enable capital to maintain production, or again, in 1919, when he held the tripartite Industrial Conference between labour, capital and the state in response to rising unionization and militancy. These examples merely acknowledge the immediacy of the problem of the hegemony of the mass industrial worker who was able to bring production to a halt through weapons such as the sit-down strike.

The sit-down strike enabled a small number of workers to halt production and leave the plants idle simply by barricading themselves into the factories. The 'unknowledgeable' mass worker quickly learned how to resist the ethics of the factory and to use the control processes of the industry – the technology – to halt production, tie up vast resources and leave capital idle. For example, at the centre of the Flint sit-down at the General Motors Fisher Body Plant in 1937, only 1,000 of the 7,000 workers at the plant took part. However, because of the integrated nature of production and the fact that this was a 'Mother Plant' supplying three-quarters of GM's 69 other American factories, it left some 135,000 workers out of the total production force of 150,000 without work – the newly created mass industrial worker had political power on a scale quite different to the craftworker. Thus management's central weakness was that the technical 'control linked the entire plant's workforce and when the line stopped every worker necessarily joined the strike' (Edwards, 1979: 128). Homogeneity trumped heterogeneity, politics trumped ethics.

These strikes were characterized by a number of issues – they were spontaneous, workers' demands were often more militant than those of their union leaders, and they were increasingly 'political' rather than 'industrial'. Thus the Flint protests won support from politicians endorsing Roosevelt's 'New Deal' and it went on to ensure the unionization of US heavy industry and the completion of the transition to Fordism (itself a political defeat for the working class – Hardt and Negri, 1994; Gramsci, 1971). These sit-down strikes were a tactic developed, at least in the USA, as a response to management violence against picket lines (Torigian, 1999: 333) and they were a fundamental element of the Fordist compromise which lasted until the 1970s. As

Torigian (1999: 334) expresses it, ‘Without the advantages afforded by the sit-down strike – and this gets to the core of my argument – it is doubtful if the labour movement, even after it shifted to an industrial model of unionism, would ever have established itself in the Fordist–Taylorist factory system.’ Here mass industrial workers moved closer to Tronti’s ‘social mass without division’ and they used their increasing homogeneity to politically intervene and shape their own and indeed capital’s reproduction. Labour not capital, politics not ethics, homogeneity not heterogeneity were to create the future.

It is because of this homogeneity that state intervention and planning become the hallmarks of the new structure. This socialization of antagonism that we see in the formation of the homogeneous working class demanded a unified response from capital so that it set the collective capitalist good against the private or individual capitalist interest; what we have termed earlier as the prioritization of the bourgeoisie – as a class – over the individual capitalist because labour again forced capital to act in class terms. The terms of social struggle now stretched beyond the factory gates and they were laid down by the questions of recomposition posed by the mass worker. In order to disorganize–reorganize–subordinate workers, to prevent the emergence of economic demands becoming radical political demands, capital had to intervene at the level of need and turn need into an element of capitalism’s renewal via consumption. Demand is no longer merely an economic category it becomes a political category as the state leaves the political and juridical structures of liberalism behind.

Baldi (1972) addresses this issue of active political agency through an analysis of the recomposition of the international working class between 1880 and 1920. In his paper, he argues capital’s response to labour’s homogeneity and refusal was an attempt to break working-class unity through an increasing division of labour and technology. He suggests, as we have seen, that capital and management had to grow in scale in response to labour’s homogeneity; hence capital moves from the craft workshop to the mass-produced factory. However, Taylorism largely left the factory and the society divided. At first, capital had not included the state in its planning, indeed it explicitly wanted the state to stay out of the factory (Montgomery, 1987). But this has to alter with the social relations of mass production which demonstrated the very instability of capital’s emerging mass production system and its dependence on the homogeneous working class’s consumption. Working-class refusal of the then capitalist social relations creates tomorrow. They do so by demanding less work, more consumption – what came to be known as the wage as ‘independent variable’ (i.e. independent of productivity increases). Craftworker hierarchies and natural orders were dismantled and the unforeseen political recomposition that this entailed came from management’s planned technological fix in the assembly line and Taylorism. These then led to productivity rises that crucially left capital vulnerable to the larger mass homogeneous workers’ demands for more free time, more consumption – that is, higher wages also became necessary to capital’s need to sell its mass product.

The response to this political power is manifold. Thus it encompasses the ‘management’ of public opinion (Bernays, 1928); Weber’s (1978: 1442–1463) hopes for the charismatic leader who would manage the mass through demagoguery and propaganda; the increased emphasis on the managing and marketing of lifestyles and status (Lears, 2000); and the desire that labour would give up its autonomy at work for consumerist ‘coin of fun’ at the weekend (Mills, 1951: 237). In many different ways society is to be managed to an increasing level. The state integrates labour’s antagonism into the economy: public opinion and propaganda develop, at the organizational level General Electric becomes the poster child of corporate life through its emphasis on semi-skilled operatives and its inclusion of labour in management via mutual benefit associations, safety committees, apprentice clubs, women’s clubs, holiday pay, bonuses and pensions tied to service, a concern for civic life and provincial politics, e.g. an emphasis on ‘dry

zones' and anti-red-light districts, an Americanization programme and productivity payments (Montgomery, 1987: 438–457) – ways to create and manage heterogeneity become more varied and more important. Central to this management in the private sphere was an emphasis on the 'ethics' of the 'steady' worker and the 'tied' or married worker with responsibilities. All of this was about creating a new type of worker, one who is controlled and predictable (Meadows, 1947: 363–364). Fragmentation and heterogeneity need creating through the production of regulation of the private sphere. Nevertheless, and in contrast to today, the ethics and heterogeneity of management in the private sphere was always confronted and circumscribed by the politics of working-class homogeneity, which was often expressed as anti-firm and pro-state, however poorly its politics were rendered. One of the reasons for the contemporary return of business ethics is because of the simultaneous extension of the scale of working-class life alongside the use of heterogeneity to parse its experience as capital globalizes. This has enabled capital to segment and divide the lives of workers as workers; to enforce a heterogeneity and return us to ethics.

## Conclusion

What was presented is perhaps an unconventional approach to business ethics. Business ethics usually starts with the proposition that business can be ethical, that capital is the agent of change (with the leader its instrument) and that the turn to business ethics shows how business can recognize the individual needs of its workers, serves the environment and society more broadly, and has a host of other beneficial material and ethical consequences. This chapter disputes all of these propositions and uses an analysis of management and the steel mills to tease out what capital means when it discusses ethics. In this sense the chapter sees business ethics in a manner similar to human resource management, organization studies or accounting. That is, as a technology of regulation invoked to encourage heterogeneity – or fragmentation – amongst the working class and, thereby, to support the leadership role of capital. In this sense business ethics is a politics of rule. Furthermore, we would suggest that the need for it increases when capitalism itself is undergoing a major restructuring which entails a recomposition of the working class. We are currently in the midst of one such recomposition. This is evidenced in terms of the paring back of the welfare state (a downward pressure on the social wage), the globalization of capital, the rise in inequality, deindustrialization and the increase in various forms of unemployment, precarity, underemployment, etc. Because of recomposition, capitalism needs a new ethical or moral defence – it needs legitimating – and hence we have seen an increasing interest in business ethics, corporate social responsibility, entrepreneurship, etc. in recent years.

Paraphrasing Marx, we would say that business ethics (and we could add leadership, entrepreneurialism) 'plays approximately the same role in [modern management] as original sin does in theology' (Marx, 1976: 873). Instead, we seek to understand this process through the lens of the political power of the working class and the notions of homogeneity and heterogeneity developed by Tronti in the mid-1960s. The debates about the crisis of democracy and the crisis of profitability which took place in the 1970s and 1980s were all responses fundamentally generated by and blamed on a too homogeneous and, hence, politically powerful working class which had to be weakened via globalization, deindustrialization, the strengthening of the moral necessity of work, the attack on wages, pensions and other entitlements, etc. These processes were aimed at breaking working-class homogeneity. They also entailed capital operating on an ever larger scale so that now one of the key roles of national and transnational government is to smooth the global spatial and political plane for capital. In the face of political growth of the worker in the course of the 1960s and early parts of the 1970s, capital was once again forced

to expand the level at which it operated and indeed the level at which it socialized capital itself. In some senses this is a continuation with the past – a further extension and fragmentation of the division of labour and further attempts at fragmentation through various political, economic and organizational policies. But there is also another possible continuation with the past – capital is creating an ever larger working class which *potentially* may homogenize and further develop its political power. Certainly, we can see elements of this in a country such as China, which is both wealthier and more unequal, witnessing increasing industrial unrest and the formation of a more militant and homogeneous working class, and in India where the extension of agribusiness meets with the aggressive response of Maoist-inspired fighters over large swathes of territory (Roy, 2011). But one can also see tentative signs of this in the West, especially around immigrant movements and precarious labour as the periphery is reimported into the core (Silver, 2003).<sup>6</sup> Viewed in this light, it is perhaps not surprising capital is enlisting ethics.

As we have seen this ‘leadership’ role of capital is really a reaction. As capital globalizes it appears to be falling back on forms of primitive accumulation, e.g. biopiracy, intellectual property rights to capture value it did not create, state investment for research and development, the accessing of existing assets that it had to concede against its will to labour, e.g. pension funds, the increased deployment of the military, etc. – whilst all the time claiming its own virtuousness. Thus, at its most dynamic and indeed apparent strength, capital also seems somewhat vulnerable – where is its next dynamic burst to come from? If Tronti is correct it will come from the working class. In this sense, we should look to places like China and India or, indeed, areas of the newly impoverished core that have been made peripheral, for the next seismic shift in capitalism – recognizing that business ethics is one of the many managerial tools of discipline the role of which is to constrain, fragment and individuate (so they become easier to pick off) those tendencies of homogenization inherent in capitalist development, which it continually tries to constrain. To expect capital to provide leadership is to err. Its unity is always partial, as witnessed by the increasing tensions between major global powers, and it has no innovative or compelling answer to the urgent questions of the era in the political, social, economic or environmental spheres except to say ‘more of the same’ – ‘trust me, I have business ethics’.

As we know, fragmentation and heterogeneity were not completely successful – indeed, the poster child of the new corporate form GE was the site of perhaps the USA’s first sit-down strike (Montgomery, 1987: 445). Keynesianism and the Fordist compromise itself eventually collapsed under the weight of oil shocks, the costs to the USA of maintaining dollar convertibility with spiralling costs of the Vietnam war and its loss of competition to European and Japanese capital, and also because of the working-class demand for an ever greater share of production (which facilitated a crisis of profitability in the 1970s). These demands drew a response from capital, which was not about inclusive or soft ethics but, rather, a turn to the right and the emergence of neoliberalism spearheaded by an activist state dedicated to recomposing the social structure and generating the entrepreneurial subject. Central to this was a further concentration of wealth and capital and the rise of what has been called ‘the new few’ (Mount, 2013); attacks on the welfare state; increasing ideological attacks on vulnerable groups – welfare recipients or migrants; intensified ‘soft’ techniques of creating heterogeneity through human resource management, the rise of core–periphery workforces and the flexible firm and, we would argue, business ethics and corporate social responsibility. But also with this has come the simultaneous creation of millions more massified workers where conditions are being united on a much greater scale than ever before in China, India, Vietnam, etc. Yet again we see heterogeneity and homogeneity intertwined. To see business ethics as somehow eradicating, ameliorating or leading the debate on these developments is to misread its function. Rather, it is about restoration. It is the presenting of the market, globalization and the concentration of capital as



natural and fair. It is about legitimization and the seeming turning away from politics to ethics, which surreptitiously inveighs against politics as a collective pursuit at the same time as re-enforcing the structuration of relations of power and subordination.

## Notes

- 1 We are thinking for instance of David Harvey's notion of neoliberalism as the 'restoration of class power' in Harvey, 2007.
- 2 One easy way to think about this is the divisions between capitalists over things that today in the West appear to be 'common sense'. For example, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was trades unionists and progressive reformers who systematically pushed for labour reform, working hours legislation, child protection regulations or worker injury compensation insurance and the bourgeoisie who split and divided depending on industry, size of capital deployed, nature of specific factories and so on (Nelson, 1995: 136–152). Thus the bourgeoisie was fragmented and unable to lead and when it became more homogeneous – as it did – it was often in a reactionary mode, e.g. to oppose working hour restrictions – as such, the future was built by labour.
- 3 There are of course numerous others: flexibilization of work contracts, attacks on worker representation (anti-trade union law), differential pay rates, outsourcing and internationalization of the division of labour, shift away from manufacturing to low-end non-unionized services – the list can be extended still further. We will, however, focus on the role of business ethics in this process.
- 4 Obviously, there are many people excluded from this vision of the world, e.g. slaves or the unskilled.
- 5 For a schematic outlining of three figures of class composition (the 'professional worker', the 'mass worker' and the 'social worker'), see Negri, 1996: 154–156.
- 6 One can also see the corrupted version of this in the expansion of extreme right-wing and fundamentalist parties and movements that try to form a threatening homogeneity around myths of race, nation and religion. When 'class' ceases to be a respectable form of identification, to what do the oppressed turn but mythical forms of unity.

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