

Spring 2023

## On Living Fully, or, How to Not be Made an Object

Fiona Pearl Miller  
Bard College, fm8465@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2023](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023)

 Part of the [Political Theory Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Miller, Fiona Pearl, "On Living Fully, or, How to Not be Made an Object" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 244.

[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2023/244](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023/244)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2023 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

On Living Fully, or,  
How to Not be Made an Object

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Fiona Pearl Miller

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York,  
May 2023



To My Grandma Julie,  
who would have had something to say about all this.



## Acknowledgements and Dedications

To my sovereign-in-mind Father, a truly transcendentalist man—for reminding me that I'm not at fighter pilot status, not yet. For teaching me to keep trying.

To my beautiful, kind, strong-willed Mother, whose undying love and support makes me wonder if consistency actually can be a virtue—for never entertaining my delusions and believing in me always.

To Roger, without whom this project would not have been possible, I'll be brief—for teaching me a lot of the stuff in this project and a lot more that didn't make it in. I probably would have written something much more mundane if not for your classes.

To Ariella, my forever inspiration—for calling me on the phone; for the advice I've taken and the advice I've ignored. You are (almost) always right.

To Billy—for reminding me to love nature, to obey my whim, and to breathe.

To James—for being my comrade-in-arms. To ice-cream missions, board games, and high class television shows, I will always say to you, "Absofruitly."

To all of my friends—I am the company I keep. For conversation and joy and fun and adventures; for teaching me who I am and who I'd like to be.

To the Third Floor of the Stevenson Library—for cigarette breaks and unrelenting distraction.

To Fortitude, Prudence, Temperance and Justice. To the unsung virtue of Honesty.

To my Haters—I love everybody.

And to Zoe, my wife—singular conversations with you have taught me more than some years of my life. I look forward to the rest to come. Until Linlithgo, and then whatever happens after.

To anyone who has ever made me laugh; to döner guys and delivery men; to everyone alive. To the music I've listened to and to the songs I have yet to hear. To Hitchcock; to the follies. To the courage to change what I can and accept what I can't; to the wisdom to know the difference. To those not playing the game. To long walks, to roadtrips, to gas stations, to drive-thrus. To backgammon, to birds; to bus rides, color-coated contrails, and gleaming silver grain silos. To front stoops and porches and direct sunlight and seawater. To you, the person reading this:

Thank you.

Now don't let them pull the wool over your eyes!



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER I: THE OLD FABLE OF MAN</b> .....	6
WE SHOULD ALL BE MAN THINKING: INTERNAL AUTONOMY.....	8
TO ACT IN ACCORDANCE WITH ONE’S WILL: ACTIVE-EXTERNAL AUTONOMY.....	14
<b>CHAPTER II: FOUNDATIONAL DISCONNECTS / MEANS AND ENDS</b> .....	20
THE REGIME OF THE ENGINEER, OR, HOW TO OBJECTIFY THROUGH TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS.....	23
OARSMEN WITH STOPPED EARS: THE MASSES TODAY.....	31
<b>CHAPTER III: INTERNAL AUTONOMY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA</b> .....	37
THE GORDIAN KNOT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEWS.....	40
CONFORMITY OF MIND AND THE WAR ON IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE .....	44
<b>CHAPTER IV: SMOLDERING RESENTMENT WITH NOWHERE TO GO</b> .....	51
NEW ERA, SAME OLD FABLE: ACTIVE-EXTERNAL AUTONOMY IN THE 4HL.....	54
MORE MONEY, LESS VIRTUE: THE GAMIFICATION OF POLITICS.....	58
ON THE NECESSITY OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN PURSUIT OF AUTONOMY.....	63
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	72
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	76





## INTRODUCTION

---

The idea for this project was born from a long walk through Berlin on the first day of last year's Spring. That March day had gifted the city a kind of afternoon that winter compels you to forget: full sun, around sixty-five degrees, magnolia blush; and as I wandered east-bound-and-down I stopped into an English language used bookstore and picked up a copy of *Eclipse of Reason*. Seven Euros. Well spent.

I made my way south towards a field I knew well, laid my beautifully useless jacket down on the grass, and sitting there, reading white pages made golden by the last throes of sunlight, was struck by how very transcendentalist Horkheimer seemed to be. To my knowledge there have been no scholarly attempts to integrate the two schools of thought to date. My goal in this project is first and foremost to draw attention to the degradation of autonomy in mass society today—and second, to amend this profound oversight.

You can figure a lot of things out from a long, solitary, directionless walk spent noticing—looking at people you don't know as you pass them by and wondering about their lives, their families; listening to the melody of strangers speaking languages you'll never learn but hearing them laugh and knowing there was a joke. Seeing rain tumble down and turn pavement dark, the sky shifting into new shades, leaves moving like birds. A landscape-transforming heavy snow or the motion of a city in the summertime. A song that means something to you falling from a balcony overhead, you catching it as you go by and feeling it stay with you. And your own mind moving in relation to it all; the world, there, and you there too, together and distinct and happening all at once. You come to the end of a street

and are faced with a choice: right or left. Your whim compels you to turn one direction or the other and following through, you keep on walking, not knowing what you'll see or what you'll learn or when you'll choose again. To will, and then to act, and then to will once more: the distillation of human dignity.

The whole point of living, to me, is to live fully, to plunge headfirst into the pursuit of determining the course of your own life. To view yourself as an end and not to contort your life into being a means for some external objective. And to treat everyone and everything likewise. To think deeply and introspectively, and to act in harmony with your innermost beliefs. Modern society compels us to do otherwise, to reduce ourselves into instruments for the “good” of the whole. But this “good” is not our good, and any word to the contrary is a lie: we have not agreed upon it, and so we must reject it.

We live today in two distinct but increasingly inseparable realms: the virtual and the physical. As technological progress continues on its ceaseless march, the virtual more and more seems to subsume the physical, or at the very least stand alongside it—we craft online personas, play out interactions through its limited forms, and even come to refer to people by their username instead of by their given one. The virtual space necessitates a kind of distillation of our inherently complex selves: as Byung-Chul Han states in *Psychopolitics*, “Like is the digital Amen.”<sup>1</sup> Digital forms compel us to reduce our thoughts, our emotions, and our actions down to their bare essentials and select one of the finite options that best fits. “Like” or “Dislike?”; our capacity for introspection and original thought atrophying.

---

<sup>1</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Futures (London ; New York: Verso, 2017), 12.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno are united by their shared discontent with the reduction of man into an object in mass society. For the benefit of the societal whole, individuals are compelled into conformity, but this imposed conformity is degrading to the person expected to acquiesce: instead of being an end in himself, he becomes meaningful only through his functional output; only through how efficiently he manages to leave his individuality at the doorposts of his home, exchanging it for the masquerade expected of whatever societal role he obediently spends most of his waking hours fulfilling.

The treatment of man as a means to a societal end rather than an end in himself is objectifying because it strips individuals of autonomy. Instead of being able to exercise their fundamental capacity for creation through original thought and action, individuals are compressed into useful instruments, each one interchangeable with the next. For Emerson and Thoreau, this reification is self-imposed—individuals themselves are the arbiters of their own objectification by choosing to conform both internally and externally. In Chapter One, “The Old Fable of Man,” I outline the transcendentalist conception of what it means for an individual to possess autonomy.

Emerson writes that individuals are rendered objects when they, through viewing themselves in terms of their function instead of as autonomous beings, allow one part of themselves to subsume the whole. The transcendentalist conception of autonomy is based in non-conformity, self-democracy, and mental sovereignty, but it is limited in that it neglects to account for the ways in which societal forces actively prevent individuals from realizing autonomy. I find that autonomy contains two main aspects: internal and active-external. While

the transcendentalist conception of internal autonomy is crucial in evaluating whether or not an individual is autonomous in mind, it does not go far enough—an individual must actually be able to act in accordance with his will in order to be considered truly autonomous.

This is where the work of the Frankfurt School steps in. Horkheimer and Adorno both notice the same problem of conformity and objectification as Emerson and Thoreau, but find that the impetus of realizing one's autonomy cannot fall solely on the individual because he is subject to societal forces that actively prevent him from realizing autonomy. They attribute the reduction of the individual to a host of phenomena, all stemming from post-industrialist capitalism. In Chapter Two, “Foundational Disconnects/Means and Ends,” I move from the transcendentalists to look at the problem of autonomy through the lens of Horkheimer and Adorno, who expand the transcendentalist conception of this reification. These authors argue that after the instrumentalization of reason following the Enlightenment, foundational virtues of society such as justice, equality, happiness, and tolerance lost their intellectual roots and were effectively replaced by efficiency as the primordial goal of a society based on capitalism.

After elucidating both the transcendentalist conception of autonomy and that of the Frankfurt School in the first half of this thesis, I move to analyze how this problem has been exacerbated in the modern era. Chapter Three, “Internal Autonomy in the Age of Social Media,” looks at the degradation of internal autonomy in our current epoch due to the imposition of social media. The entanglement of news and entertainment works to prevent individuals from practicing the introspective thought necessary to attain internal autonomy because they are overexposed to the opinions of others, and the trend of “cancel culture” incentivizes individuals to conform their thought with that of those around them for fear of being ostracized.

In the final chapter of this thesis, “Smoldering Resentment with Nowhere To Go,” I evaluate the systemic roadblocks in place today which prevent individuals from actualizing their autonomy through the practice of active-external autonomy, and conclude with a call for conscious societal integration in pursuit of autonomy. Finally, in my conclusion, I outline a few proposals that I believe might help to better the state of society and render individuals as autonomous as they ought to be.

## CHAPTER ONE

THE OLD FABLE OF MAN

---

In “The American Scholar”, a lecture delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College in 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson describes the Old Fable of Man, a mythic interpretation of the division of labor which postulates that just as the hand was once divided into five fingers in order to make man more efficient to himself, the gods divided “One Man” into men.<sup>2</sup> Man could now simultaneously be Man on the farm, Man Thinking, Man working on the railroad, and so on. Because of this dissolution, one had to look at the whole of society to find the complete dominion of man. As this fountain of power became more and more dispersed, man ended up living in his singularity as mere parts: a single leg, a spare arm, a solitary elbow. As nineteenth century industrialization began to further entrench capitalism as the dominating force of society, individual creativity became increasingly superfluous. The relations of production could only be kept efficient, intact, and reproducible if each human unit could be replaced adequately by another without any noticeable difference in output.

Technological innovation began to require less conscious action from the individual, and so society became increasingly focused on quantifying man only through his productive utility. Resultantly, Emerson writes, “Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things.”<sup>3</sup> The evaluation of workers only in terms of their productive output works to objectify individuals— in

---

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar.” In *Nature and Selected Essays*, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 2003), 84.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson, 84.

Emerson's words, "The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm."<sup>4</sup> Man on the farm was reduced to a mere farmer; Man in the automobile a machine; Man Thinking but a thinker. Laboring only as a means to an end that was determined not by them but for them, men became relegated to objects. Emerson continues, "[t]he tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship."<sup>5</sup> Labor for the sake of labor itself, that is, labor for the reproduction of the existing hierarchical relations of society—undermines individual "humanness" because individuals view themselves first and foremost in terms of their work and not as ends in themselves.

Emerson noticed this objectification of man at the hands of technological innovation and an increasingly capitalistic society in the nineteenth century, and while much progress in terms of individual freedoms has been made in the nearly two centuries which have elapsed since this address, I argue that this specific phenomenon has only gotten worse, and the Old Fable of Man takes on new relevance in our current economic epoch. Individuals must possess autonomy in order to realize the full breadth of human potential: to be an end in oneself, and not a means to a societal end. A life lived as a mere means is a life wasted. My understanding of autonomy contains two aspects: internal and active-external. In the first part of this chapter, "We Should All Be Man Thinking: Internal Autonomy," I outline the transcendentalist conception of autonomy as based in non-conformity, self-democracy, and mental sovereignty, which I find to be contained

---

<sup>4</sup> Emerson, 84-85.

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, 85.



by the term “internal autonomy.” However, I find that the possession of internal autonomy is not enough for an individual to be considered autonomous in reality. In the second part, “To Act in Accordance with One’s Will: Active-External Autonomy,” I explain that one must be both autonomous in mind and in action, because an autonomous mind is without power if not realized in conjunction with action.

#### We Should All Be Man Thinking: Internal Autonomy

Emerson uses the Old Fable of Man in order to contextualize his understanding of the role of the scholar, who, in the allocation of man’s capacities as postulated by the fable, has been the recipient of man’s capacity for thought. “In this distribution of functions the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is Man Thinking. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking.”<sup>6</sup> All individuals have the capacity to be “Man Thinking,” but modern society compels us to neglect this pursuit, relegating us to be parrots of thought rather than mentally-autonomous entities. The transcendentalist conception of autonomy rests largely upon the idea of mental sovereignty, which will be the subject of this section. I have discerned two important components of individual autonomy in the modern era: internal and active-external. The state of being “Man Thinking” is largely synonymous with what I will refer to as “internal autonomy”: the capacity to think introspectively and independently, and through the process of absolving oneself to oneself, become self-democratic, or self-ruled. Active-external autonomy is the next step: to actually act in accordance with one’s will and have a say in determining one’s own conditions of existence.

---

<sup>6</sup> Emerson, 85.

Emerson states that Man Thinking becomes degraded when he is “the victim of society.”<sup>7</sup> Societal integration and conformity is a subject of critique throughout the work of Emerson and that of his intellectual protege and friend, Henry David Thoreau. Their assessment of conformity is that it degrades and objectifies individual humanity—Emerson famously argued in “Self-Reliance” that society is in “conspiracy” against the “manhood” of its members, characterizing it as “a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion” (178)<sup>8</sup>. After the introduction of industrial capitalism as the economic force of society, society itself began to take on the attitude of a company, and as shareholders, individuals are compelled into conformity. A company must be made to be efficient, and because mass efficiency is most optimized by conformity, society too is averse to individual liberty and culture.

The individual’s capacity for original thought and action renders him unique from other beings, and to conform is to reject this aspect of humanity. To transcendentalist thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau, the state of being self-lawgiving, having autonomy, and thus holding a claim to one’s own “manhood,” cannot be realized when one is living under conditions of coercive conformity. Societal conformity works to emasculate individuals because they are not sourcing their laws from their own internal nature, but rather from the codes and mores of the masses that surround them. Emerson and Thoreau observed that individuals around them were

---

<sup>7</sup> Emerson, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 2003), 178. Rather than refusing to relate with Emerson’s work due to my indisputable lack of any Y chromosome, I understand Emerson’s use of the term manhood as synonymous with humanity. It would be a shame to write off an entire school of thought based on an unnecessarily gendered lens.

viewing themselves in terms of their productive value rather than as ends in and of themselves, neglecting their creative potential and conforming to the dominant ideology of those around them instead of thinking on their own terms. They wrote that by treating themselves as an object, individuals degraded themselves—and that self-reliance was the only antidote.

By “self-reliance,” these transcendentalist thinkers did not necessarily mean economic individualism, as it has come to imply today, but rather internal individualism akin to self-democracy, the individual's best tool with which to reject societal demands for conformity. In this sense, “self-reliance” is one aspect of internal autonomy, which is undermined by conformity. Emerson states that to be a man, one must be “a nonconformist”: “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve yourself to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world...No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it.”<sup>9</sup> The ability for one to be a “man” in this sense is universally attainable and not exclusively delineated upon gendered lines. Only by absolving oneself to oneself can an individual utilize the full breadth of human potentiality and become “a man,” that is, autonomous. To “absolve yourself to yourself” means to free yourself from societal conventions, to determine on your own what you find “good” or “bad,” and give unto yourself laws and codes to follow. In this sense, manhood is synonymous with humanity, or, the state of being autonomous.

By absolving oneself to oneself, an individual becomes self-democratic, meaning, self-ruled. In practice, this means introspective and original thought. For an individual to, when

---

<sup>9</sup> Emerson, 178-179.

faced with some concept, idea, event, or law, discern their opinion not from those circulating around them, or from what they believe the societally “correct” opinion to be, but rather from what they truly believe after introspective deliberation. Then, after discerning what they believe to be right, for an individual to act in accordance with their true beliefs, ruling themselves. Transcendentalist scholar George Kateb writes that this introspective aspect of autonomy as imagined by the transcendentalists—which he refers to as “Democratic Individuality”—is contained by “positive individuality” and “negative individuality.”<sup>10</sup>

Negative individuality is, according to Kateb, “the disposition to disobey bad conventions and unjust laws, by oneself, and on the basis of a strict moral self-scrutiny, self-examination.”<sup>11</sup> Essentially, the capacity and strength of character to, when an individual comes into contact with existing laws or policies, evaluate whether or not they find it legitimate, and then to act in accordance with their own higher laws. By doing this, an individual is self-democratic in that they are not confined by the expectations of societal conformity. “Positive individuality,” on the other hand, comes from making oneself a “project.”<sup>12</sup> As explained by Kateb, “...one must take responsibility for oneself—one’s self must become a project, one must become the architect of one’s soul.”<sup>13</sup> Through negative individuality the individual rejects aspects of society that he finds to go against his personal value system, and through positive individuality he builds himself codes anew. While these differentiations are useful in

---

<sup>10</sup> George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*, Contestations (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992), 89–90.

<sup>11</sup> Kateb, 89.

<sup>12</sup> Kateb, 90.

<sup>13</sup> See note 12.

understanding the different elements of transcendentalist autonomy, both terms oftentimes occur simultaneously and should not be distinguished as two separate components. I prefer to use the term “internal autonomy” to encapsulate both negative and positive individuality because in my view Kateb’s terms are too prescriptive in their assessment of a concept as abstract and personal as individuality.

Both positive and negative individuality might be a part of what I refer to as internal autonomy, but my understanding of it is much simpler than these terms might imply. Thoreau writes, “The faintest assured objection which one healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs of mankind. No man ever followed his genius till it misled him.”<sup>14</sup> To listen deeply and hear clearly one’s own insight, one’s own whim; and to follow it, viewing all things through one’s own eyes, and feeling things through one’s own heart: that is what it means to possess internal autonomy.

Remarking on how societal conformity degrades internal autonomy in *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau states while it is certainly bad for an individual to live under conditions of servitude that operate under a looming threat of force, it is “worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.”<sup>15</sup> Here, Thoreau is making a key distinction between active-external autonomy—in which one’s conditions of autonomy or lack thereof is determined by external forces, as exists in slavery—and internal autonomy. Both aspects are essential components of an individual’s freedom, but Thoreau views the latter as more crucial, and this is a theme throughout the work of the Transcendentalists. To be the slave-driver of one’s own mind means that the

---

<sup>14</sup> Henry David Thoreau and Jeffrey S. Cramer, *Walden*, Yale Nota Bene (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 236.

<sup>15</sup> Thoreau, 6.

individual is willingly submitting to conditions of dependency. This implies a lack of autonomy based not on any conscious threat of violence but rather on a sort of mental cooperation with one's own objectification—while the slave's state of unfreedom is blatant and leaves no alternative, the wage-laborer's condition of unfreedom is more subtle.

The objectified laborer is unfree due to his dependence on another's will, but he is unconscious of his own servitude. Kant teaches that man is unique from animals and the divine in his ability to be both a *created* and *creative* being. By neglecting to utilize his uniquely human potential for creative and original action, the individual is degraded, turning away from his own humanity and becoming animal in everything but name. Thoreau continues, "Talk of a divinity in man! Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or night; does any divinity stir within him?...How godlike, how immortal, is he?"<sup>16</sup> Thoreau links creative potential with divinity and immortality, implying that because the teamster works towards an end dictated not by him but for him, and dutifully conforms to the role expected of him, he is mortal. Rather than assuming that "mortality" is a reference to the teamsters' humanity, Thoreau is referencing the Kantian notion of man's unique position to attain some sort of divinity. By being the "slave-driver" of his own mind, the teamster turns away from his human potential for theoretical immortality—a higher existence outside of societal constraints—and, therefore, objectifies himself due to his lack of internal autonomy.

The unfreedom experienced by the wage-laborer, his lack of internal autonomy, is largely unconscious in the minds of the masses under the capitalist conception of self-reliance: the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality. Though the transcendentalists extol self-reliance as a

---

<sup>16</sup> Thoreau, 6.

virtue, and write that it is the antidote of conformity, in the modern era the term has lost its intellectual roots and been instrumentalized, becoming a motor-engine in the minds of the working that keeps the relations of production intact.

#### To Act in Accordance with One's Will: Active-External Autonomy

In my understanding of autonomy, there are two important components: internal autonomy and active-external autonomy. Internal autonomy is the capacity to “think for oneself,” to discern what one thinks about a given issue outside of the societal norms within which they are entrenched, and to achieve internal solitude as I have described above. Active-external autonomy is the essential next step: to actually act in accordance with one's internal beliefs. Both Thoreau and Emerson proselytize the importance of self-democratic autonomy, but neglect to account for the many empirical barriers which stand between individuals and the realization of active-external autonomy.

In her book, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*, Sharon Krause critiques the conception of freedom as sovereignty, arguing that individual agency is not enough on its own in order to be free because of external circumstances that undercut human action. To be an agent, she writes, one must both *will* and *act*.<sup>17</sup> To possess active-external autonomy is to act in accordance with one's inner nature; as it is only through action and creation that man can utilize the full breadth of human possibility and his own unique position as both a created and creative entity.

This aspect of individuality is demonstrated in *Walden*, the product of Henry David Thoreau's time in isolation, where he strives to new levels of the masculine, self-reliant ideal by

---

<sup>17</sup> Sharon R. Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 22.

“fronting” only the bare necessities of life, engaging in manual labor, and living in solitude.

Thoreau takes Emerson’s critiques of conformity within society and emphasis on self-reliance to a new level, removing himself from group life entirely by physically isolating himself in the woods. He is distinctly critical of the kind of conformity that Emerson wrote about when discussing the “old fable,” and he concurs with Emerson’s analysis that it objectifies and emasculates man.

Through his experiment living in isolation as detailed in *Walden*, Thoreau created his own private utopia. Alone in his cabin and hidden deep in the woods, he could act in accordance with his will and achieve immediate results, unfettered by the rules that govern society. Emerson and Thoreau are critical of societal integration because it is difficult to realize active-external autonomy whilst immersed in the structure of society. No matter how internally autonomous an individual might be—which, they explicate, is necessarily challenged by societal integration—they might not be able to act in accordance with their will.

Though conformity is inherently detrimental to individual autonomy, it must be possible to reconcile societal integration and the state of being autonomous. My reading of *Walden* points me to understand that Thoreau was not, as many believe, declaring that one can only realize the full domain of human autonomy through total physical isolation, but rather, that it is only possible to live in society if one is *mentally* in isolation. Remarking on the beauty of Walden Pond, the pond which the book itself is named for, Thoreau observes that it is surrounded on all sides by stone, giving it the appearance of walls. He states that “[i]f the name was not derived from that of some English locality,—Saffron Walden, for instance,—one might suppose that it



was called, originally, *Walled-in Pond*.<sup>18</sup> Thoreau's italics are imperative here: he is urging the reader to look closely at his allusion.

It can not be taken as coincidence that the word "paradise,"—theologically synonymous with the unattainable Garden of Eden,—etymologically stems from the borrowed Greek *parádeisos*, meaning "enclosed park or pleasure ground." If we go back further, we will find that the Greek was borrowed from the Median *paridaiza*, "enclosure," which was derived from *pairidaēz*: "build a barrier around."<sup>19</sup> The inherent impossibility of paradise, a place surrounded by walls, is thus attributed to Walden Pond. By making this allusion and drawing our attention to the way that "Walden" sounds like "walled-in," Thoreau is inviting the reader to take notice of the way that his experiment in the woods functioned as a sort of paradise, a Garden of Eden—perhaps the original state of nature. No place can truly exist completely outside of the reach of society, and if "paradise" is a space that can only exist surrounded by walls, it follows that it is an inherent impossibility.

Taken in this light, the ideal of *Walden* can be seen as the capacity for one to achieve internal solitude: sourcing their laws from themselves and becoming self-governing. Perhaps *Walden* can only exist inside of the walls of every individual human mind. Indeed, Thoreau writes that "[s]olitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows",<sup>20</sup> a declaration that physical isolation is not the form of solitude that actually matters. Emerson seems to concur with this approach to isolation, stating that one's "isolation

---

<sup>18</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 200.

<sup>19</sup> "Definition of Paradise," April 22, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradise>.

<sup>20</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.

must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation.”<sup>21</sup> Spiritual isolation thus draws man upward into the divine, transcending the mortal experience. An individual does not need to be physically isolated from others in order to be in solitude, but instead, by utilizing the full breadth of human capacities as both created and creative beings and absolving oneself to oneself, becomes isolated internally, and thus becomes autonomous in mind.

Emerson and Thoreau’s conception of autonomy is incredibly insightful, but is limited in that they neglect to account for the very real ways in which one’s autonomy is constrained by external forces. While it is essential for one to possess internal autonomy, possession is not enough to determine whether one is actually, empirically autonomous. Self-objectification is not necessarily just an individual problem—rather, it is endemic, built into the economic structure of the nation. One can be internally autonomous but still unfree in reality based on constraints to individual active-external autonomy. Both components, internal and active-external, are essential in realizing one’s autonomy. Yes, the individual must be autonomous in mind, but societal integration is not necessarily optional for many, and internal autonomy is rendered impotent when it does not coincide with the ability to act in accordance with one’s internal beliefs.

Politics, in an ideal sense, should be the route through which citizens are able to realize active-external autonomy. Voting might have been intended to be a way for individuals to have some say in their conditions of existence, but in practice government tends to cater to the wealthy few at the expense of the many. Both Emerson and Thoreau are distinctly critical of government, and have been known to write that the only legitimate form of government is one which does very little—or, as Thoreau puts it in “Civil Disobedience”: “That government is best

---

<sup>21</sup> Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 192.

which governs not at all.”<sup>22</sup> But neither Emerson or Thoreau write off political participation entirely.

What they each take issue with is the idea of extending one's dominion over another. As Emerson writes in “Politics,” “whenever I find my dominion over myself not sufficient for me, and undertake the direction of him also, I overstep the truth, and come into false relations to him. I may have so much more skill or strength than he, that he cannot express adequately his sense of wrong, but it is a lie, and hurts like a lie both him and me.”<sup>23</sup> It is not so much politics that the transcendentalists find harmful, but manipulation, or the attempt to sway another towards doing or thinking what you believe he should rather than allowing him to decide on his own accord. Manipulation undermines both the autonomy of the manipulated and the humanity of the manipulator; to dominate another is to dominate nature, and the domination of nature forces the manipulator into a subordinate position.

In his essay “Politics,” Emerson explains that the theory of politics considers the dominion of government to be both persons and property, and that government is meant to protect both. While persons are seen as equal, thus demanding a democracy, the distribution of property is and has always been unequal. In olden times, when the amassment of property was based on labor, and thus wealth came to proprietors directly, it “seemed fit” that those with property should make the laws for property, and “persons the law for persons.” However, he continues, since persons and property are inextricably linked, eventually it became settled that “proprietors should have more elective franchise than non-proprietors.”

---

<sup>22</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” 1849, <https://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper2/thoreau/civil.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Politics,” *American Transcendentalism Web* (Virginia Commonwealth University, 1844), <https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/politics.html>.

After laying out this rationale, which he considers to be the foundation of modern politics, he states that this principle,—that the wealthy should have more of a say in affairs of government than the poor,—“no longer looks so self-evident as it appeared in former times” because the laws that govern society and the structure that has arisen from them have “allowed the rich to encroach on the poor, and to keep them poor.” Emerson states that

the whole constitution of property, on its present tenures, is injurious, and its influence on persons deteriorating and degrading; that truly, the only interest for the consideration of the State, is persons: that property will always follow persons; that the highest end of government is the culture of men: and if men can be educated, the institutions will share their improvement, and the moral sentiment will write the law of the land.<sup>24</sup>

Emerson condemns the idea that the wealthy should be given priority in governmental economic matters on the basis that, first, existing laws and structures permit the rich to infringe on the poor and work to maintain existing hierarchical economic relations—which, in the context of this thesis, can be said to infringe on the poor individual’s active-external autonomy; and second, that property should not actually be of equal value to persons in the eye of the State. Emerson and Thoreau acknowledge that low-income individuals are left behind by the political system, but there exists a fundamental conflict in their proposed solution. So long as the structure of government still prioritizes the aims of the wealthy over those of the masses, education will continue to be unjustly distributed; and “the moral sentiment” will forever be written by the same hand that has been strangling the pen of lawmaking since the founding.

---

<sup>24</sup> Emerson, “Politics.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### FOUNDATIONAL DISCONNECTS / MEANS AND ENDS

---

*“Through the countless agencies of mass production and its culture the conventionalized modes of behavior are impressed on the individual as the only natural, respectable, and rational ones. He defines himself only as a thing, as a static element, as success or failure. His yardstick is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful approximation to the objectivity of his function and the models established for it.”—Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment**

In Chapter One I explicate, through my understanding of the transcendentalists, my definition of autonomy as containing two vital components: internal and active-external. The Transcendentalists embrace internal autonomy but their ideal of a strong inner-freedom is constrained by societal conformity and the treatment of individuals as means to an end of efficiency. The transcendentalist understanding of what it means for an individual to be free is vital, but limited in the modern era because societal integration is not optional for many and internal autonomy is rendered impotent when not paired with active-external autonomy. Without the means to realize autonomy empirically, the kind of self-democracy articulated by the transcendentalists is insufficient. Additionally, the practice of internal autonomy is threatened by the “regime of the engineer,” under which individuals are disincentivized from realizing mental sovereignty because it does not contribute to mass efficiency.

In this chapter I will turn to the Frankfurt School to further explore the ways in which internal and active-external autonomy are constrained in mass society. Writing more than a century after the transcendentalists, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno are similarly concerned with the reduction of individuals into objects. In the “Old Fable of Man,” Emerson expresses his concern about the tendency of individuals to reduce themselves through societal

conformity into being defined by one aspect of their being instead of as complex and multifaceted beings. Horkheimer and Adorno expand this idea to argue that society is an active force in this reduction of man, and that under the technocratic regime of the engineer, the autonomy of individuals is constrained because they are treated as “means” to an ultimate end of efficiency rather than as ends in themselves. Their assessment of the problem diverges from Emerson and Thoreau in their focus on where the impetus of the realization of autonomy lies: whereas the transcendentalists find that it is ultimately up to the individual to realize his own autonomy, Horkheimer and Adorno find that individual autonomy cannot be achieved so long as existing societal structures remain intact.

This reduction of man into a thing governed by an engineered society is often referred to as reification. Horkheimer and Adorno are concerned with the ways that as a part of mass society, individuals have their humanity undermined. Under the rule of “the engineer,” whom Horkheimer and Adorno see as the symbol of the age, individuals are treated as useful objects, measured only by their functional potentiality. They are also wary of conformity of thought, but see it as a dangerous inevitability in a democracy where the majority principle has triumphed. Rather than focusing on autonomy as an individual phenomenon, only to be realized through the work of each citizen on their own, they see freedom as a macro-problem, solvable only through significant structural change.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason*, which will be my guiding texts, these authors postulate—in a method that echoes transcendentalist thought—that while the technological innovations of the Enlightenment were intended to further progress and reason, they have instead led to the domination of the individual. To put this in the context of this Senior

Project, the problem that Horkheimer and Adorno are illustrating is that the individual's capacity to think, or, to possess internal autonomy, as well as his ability to act, or realize active-external autonomy, have both been undermined by elite manipulation and the proliferation of institutions which, following the desecration of reason and its transformation into an instrument towards the ultimate end of "efficiency," reduce man by quantifying him en masse.

In Part One of this chapter, "The Regime of the Engineer, or How To Objectify Through Technological Progress," I illustrate how technological progress has led to the objectification of the individual and explain the "reconfiguration of reason" following the Enlightenment, which Horkheimer and Adorno see as the central issue of the modern era. The Enlightenment theorized that everything could be made knowable, and led to the substitution of objective reason for subjective reason, instrumentalizing the concept of reason and treating it as a means rather than an end in itself. A government operating under instrumental reason, or, as Horkheimer refers to it, under "the rule of the engineer," treats individuals likewise as means to an end, undermining their freedom by neglecting to view them as ends in themselves.

In Part Two of this chapter, "Oarsmen With Stopped Ears: The Masses Today," I apply this phenomenon to my understanding of "internal autonomy" as explained in Chapter One. Horkheimer and Adorno use the myth of Odysseus as an allegory to demonstrate the way that elite domination deprives the masses of mental sovereignty. This understanding of the problem of autonomy explicitly implicates the elites, who are able to apprehend reality due to their societal position and thus have a greater opportunity to realize autonomy. But the masses of society, who Horkheimer and Adorno liken to the oarsmen on Odysseus's ship, are intentionally deafened to "the way things really are" because the ship of production must be made to stay on

course. Both this process and the treatment of individuals as means to an end by the rule of the engineer work to deprive individuals of autonomy by reducing non-elite actors into useful instruments, rendering them mere objects in the service of production. The individual capacity for cognition is not conducive to either efficient production or the maintenance of the capitalist order, and so mental sovereignty in the masses is abandoned.

#### The Regime of the Engineer, or How to Objectify Through Technological Progress

The Frankfurt School's view of the modern era is framed largely around the idea that the Enlightenment's relentless scientific inquiry into the natural world has, by attempting to understand individuals as scientifically knowable objects, undermined individual autonomy. The Enlightenment introduced scientific procedure to the world, and in doing so theorized that everything could be made knowable. One could now understand the previously unexplainable through rigorous experimentation and study. This approach has extended beyond the realm of what can be known through natural science and has infiltrated the social studies, carrying with it the implication that the individual can be analyzed, quantified, and ultimately known through normalization of human behavior according to general laws.

But this method falls flat when presented with a heterogeneous populace. If every individual was autonomous in both mind and action, it would be impossible to scientifically quantify or predict human behavior, and so the post-Enlightenment attitude incentivizes homogenization. In the preface to *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer states that "...even as technical knowledge expands the horizon of man's thought and activity, his autonomy as an individual, his ability to resist the growing apparatus of mass manipulation, his power of imagination, his



independent judgement appear to be reduced.”<sup>25</sup> While technical progress should in theory expand individual freedom, Horkheimer finds that the coinciding societal mindset that followed such progress actually works to deteriorate autonomy due to the treatment of individuals as means rather than as ends in themselves. Though individuals have an “expanded horizon” of thought and activity as technology progresses, the capacity for internal autonomy is neglected. The atrophication of imagination and independent judgment means that when faced with a given issue, individuals rarely practice introspective and original thought. Instead, they look to the herd to find the “correct opinion,” so that they can better conform their thought with that of those around them. This phenomenon undermines the human capacity for originality, reducing individuals into mere objects.

Technological progress tends to provoke the reduction of men into objects. Horkheimer concludes that the “[a]dvance in technical facilities for enlightenment is accompanied by a process of dehumanization. Thus progress threatens to nullify the very goal it is supposed to realize—the idea of man.”<sup>26</sup> This reification of man has become endemic. Technological innovation has escalated exponentially in the 75 years since Horkheimer wrote these words, and the problem he is explicating has only grown alongside this development. While the intended goal of technological progress might have been to further the dominion of man and allow individuals to automate sectors of society in order to free themselves from objectification through undignified labor (as explained in the Old Fable), individuals have instead been dominated by the very technology that was supposed to liberate them.

---

<sup>25</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, Bloomsbury Revelations (1947; repr., London ; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), vii.

<sup>26</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, vii.

In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer uses the engineer as “the symbol of this age”—an age that values technological production over individual freedom.<sup>27</sup> He states that while the engineer is not as exclusively focused on profit making as some more traditionally capitalistic figures of the era such as the industrialist or merchant, the autonomy of individuals is undermined by his rule because his use of “rationality” pertains to domination rather than reason.

The engineer is not interested in understanding things for their own sake or for the sake of insight, but in accordance with their being fitted into a scheme, no matter how alien to their own inner structure; this holds for living beings as well as inanimate things. The engineer's mind is that of industrialism in its streamlined form. His purposeful rule would make men an agglomeration of instruments without a purpose of their own.<sup>28</sup>

The gaze of the engineer reduces everything that it looks upon, viewing individuals, activities, art, and objects alike as mere tools that may suit some end rather than on their own terms. This mentality, while masquerading as reason, is akin to domination because when put into practice it deprives individuals of autonomy. Without any purpose of their own and treated as instruments, individuals are unfree. In surrendering their freedom in order to fulfill their role in the joint-stock company of society, they are reduced from unique beings into purposes for the predetermined end of efficiency.

Under this kind of technocratic rule, and what Horkheimer refers to as the “deification of industrial activity”<sup>29</sup>, every action—inside or outside of the workplace—must be made to be productive if it is to be considered worthwhile. Horkheimer illustrates the way that even non-economic activity is made productive through the example of relaxation, which he states is

---

<sup>27</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

to be regarded as a vice unless it is being used efficiently in order to “assure fitness for further activity.”<sup>30</sup> This sentiment degrades internal autonomy because individuals are taught to conform their desires with means that will ensure productive output. The will of the individual no longer carries meaning or value on its own terms.

Horkeimer’s analysis of technocratic rule is strikingly similar to Emerson’s Old Fable of Man: through coercive conformity and labor that lacks creative action, individuals are treated as objects rather than humans, only valued in terms of their productive output instead of as ends in themselves. However, Horkheimer’s conception of the problem diverges from the transcendentalists in its understanding of the ways in which mass society makes it difficult for individuals (even Emersonian ones) to realize their capacity for freedom. While the transcendentalists believe that the impetus of realizing one’s autonomy falls on the individual, Horkheimer finds that, by nature of the all-encompassing structure of modern society, individuals lack the very autonomy that would allow them to break away. The force of society is such that individuals are compelled into cooperation and conformity, swept along the course of their lives and fitted into the slot deemed appropriate for them without a clear way out. This interpretation of the problem implies that the forces against the realization of autonomy, internal and active-external, are such that both aspects can only be realized in the masses through significant structural change.

Horkheimer goes on to explain that “the decline of the individual” is not the fault of technology or production itself, but the forms in which technology and production take place: “the interrelationships of human beings within the specific framework of industrialization.”<sup>31</sup> He

---

<sup>30</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 107.

<sup>31</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 108.

writes that labor, research, invention, and hard work are all responses to necessity, but that the pattern becomes “absurd” when these actions are made into idols themselves rather than means through which some higher goal (such as happiness, general welfare, comfort, justice, etc) can be achieved. He states that while the promise of post-Enlightenment technological progress was to further the idea of man, offering fulfillment and “unrestrained enjoyment,” “the idolization of progress leads to the opposite of progress. Arduous labor for a meaningful end may be enjoyed and even loved. A philosophy that makes labor an end in itself leads eventually to resentment of all labor.”<sup>32</sup> It is not so much labor itself that deteriorates autonomy, but an endemic structural hierarchy of value that places labor above the individual person.

Horkheimer attributes this recalibration of value to the elevation in modern society of what he calls “subjective reason” over the old, “objective” view of reason that had existed for centuries prior. While objective reason once existed as a higher and universal force distinct from the individual, subjective reason turns reason into something that serves a purpose: instead of being connected with any concrete ends, reason becomes a tool with which individuals can reach their goal more efficiently. Emerson states in his essay “Politics” that “[g]overnments have their origin in the moral identity of men. Reason for one is seen to be reason for another, and for every other.” Under subjective reason, reason for one might not be the same as reason for another—if the origin of government can be found in an assumed common moral identity among the governed, what happens when this common conception of reason becomes undermined by its configuration into an instrumental tool? Without any universal understanding of reason, which is the foundation of government, government loses its moral foundation.

---

<sup>32</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 108.

While it might seem as though the reconfiguration of reason from objective to subjective would expand individual autonomy because the individual can now act any way that they want to without needing to conform his conception of reason with the universal understanding of it, freedom is not synonymous with license, and the subjective form of reason actually serves to objectify the individual. In a society under capitalism, where individuals are compelled towards action not in accordance with their own internal laws but based only on what a “reasonable” process would be to reach some predetermined end, they end up unfree, “slave-drivers of their own mind.” In a quasi-transcendentalist observation, Horkheimer writes that

The total transformation of each and every being into a field of means leads to the liquidation of the subject who is supposed to use them... Subjectivization, which exalts the subject, also dooms him... Domination of nature involves domination of man. Each subject not only has to take part in the subjugation of external nature, human and nonhuman, but in order to do so must subjugate nature in himself.<sup>33</sup>

Since individuals in society under the regime of the engineer are compelled to treat both themselves and others around them as tools, their essential human nature is undermined.

Another effect of the replacement of objective reason by subjective reason following the Enlightenment’s emphasis on empirical and scientifically quantifiable knowledge is that, as Horkheimer explains, the average modern intellectual is prone to believe not in abstract concepts like “justice,” but rather in science, or, “the classification of facts and the calculation of probabilities.”<sup>34</sup> This becomes an issue when abstract concepts that once guided the political domain become pliable due to their lack of a clear scientific element: “The statement that justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression is scientifically unverifiable and useless... the more the concept of reason becomes emasculated, the more easily it lends itself

---

<sup>33</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 15.

to ideological manipulation and to propagation of even the most blatant lies.”<sup>35</sup> Under subjective reason, anything can be said to be reasonable so long as the proposed means match up to the prospective ends—but since reason does not exist as a higher and objective form, there is no baseline for what a “reasonable” end might be.

The consequences of the formalization of reason as a means to an end are dire. “Justice, equality, happiness, tolerance, all the concepts that, as mentioned, were in preceding centuries supposed to be inherent in or sanctioned by reason, have lost their intellectual roots.”<sup>36</sup> Without the existence of an objective reason, and due to its replacement—at the hands of the Enlightenment—with science as the new arbiter of empirical truth, concepts such as these no longer have any basis because there is no way to scientifically prove their worth.

Under the rule of the engineer, goals and values only gain significance through their relationship to the capitalistic system of production. Happiness, prosperity, and health are no longer ends in and of themselves, but are valuable because of their functional potentiality: the terms “designate favorable conditions for intellectual and material production.”<sup>37</sup> Because efficiency has become the primordial virtue of society under the rule of the engineer, the main factor that contributes to whether or not a goal is to be seen as valuable is its functional output—and individual autonomy does not bode as well for mass efficiency as do homogeneity, conformity, and docility.

---

<sup>35</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> See note 35.

<sup>37</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 66.

Horkheimer writes that the “decline of the individual” should not be attributed solely to technological innovations, or even the individual himself, but to “the present structure and content of the ‘objective mind,’ the spirit that pervades social life in all its branches.”<sup>38</sup> Whereas reason was once seen as an objective and higher concept that existed in itself, once it was made subjective, it became a tool, and this reconfiguration rearranged the content of the objective mind of society.

The patterns of thought and action that people accept ready-made from the agencies of mass culture act in their turn as though they were the ideas of the people themselves. The objective mind in our era worships industry, technology, and nationality without a principle that could give sense to these categories; it mirrors the pressure of an economic system that admits of no reprieve or escape.<sup>39</sup>

Here, Horkheimer draws attention to the fundamental difference between the transcendentalist understanding of autonomy in mass society and that of the Frankfurt School. While the transcendentalists argued that autonomy was an essential component of human nature and could be actualized by anyone so long as they retreated from societal conformity and allowed themselves to realize it, Horkheimer’s conception of the problem takes account of the suffocating nature of late modernity, which allows for no escape. Internal autonomy is desecrated by apparatuses of manipulation that mirror late-stage consumeristic capitalism and feed “patterns of thought and action” to the masses of society “ready-made;” this mind-content gets accepted graciously as though the ideas were that of the individual himself; and active-external autonomy is undermined by the immobility of the individual once designated his function as a part of the economic system.

---

<sup>38</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 108.

<sup>39</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 109.

## Oarsmen with Stopped Ears: The Masses Today

*“...individuality among the masses is far less integrated and enduring than among the so-called elite...the elite have always been more preoccupied with the strategies of gaining and holding power over things. Social power is today more than ever mediated by power over things. The more intense an individual's concern with power over things, the more will things dominate him, the more will he lack any genuine individual traits, and the more will his mind be transformed into an automaton of formalized reason.”—Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason**

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that the rule of the engineer in the modern era reduces man into a thing by viewing him as valuable only in terms of his productive output and replacing foundational virtues that once united society with efficiency. This replacement makes it so that society worships efficiency and productivity above all else, and abstract concepts like “justice” and “happiness” lose any inherent meaning and are only worthwhile so long as they promote the end of efficiency. The ramification of this phenomenon is that individuals both lose sight of and are made to lose their autonomy. In order for an individual to be considered autonomous, they must possess both internal and active-external autonomy. An essential factor in both aspects of autonomy is original and creative action, as to be human is to be both created and creative. Only by exercising one's capacity for creation can an individual separate himself from other living beings and take full advantage of his humanity.

As explained in Part One of this chapter, the regime of the engineer threatens the human potential for creativity and autonomy both internally and externally. By divorcing reason from its original meaning as an objective end in itself and turning it into a subjective tool through which to ensure efficient means to some end, it strips abstract concepts and virtues of any intrinsic meaning. The cold gaze of the engineer does not discriminate—it looks upon every part of society in the same fashion, observing individuals, objects, and concepts alike only in terms of



their use-value. The idea of man is thus emptied out of value in and of itself, and man is treated as valuable only insofar as he is productive.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write that “[t]he technological progress into which the subject has objectified itself after being removed from the consciousness, is free of...all meaning altogether, because reason itself has become the mere instrument of the all-inclusive economic apparatus.”<sup>40</sup> Here, they articulate the central purpose behind the instrumentalization of reason and the subsequent reification of individuals: the maintenance of the capitalistic order. The transformation of reason from a once objective concept into a subjective tool is accompanied by the decline of autonomy in the masses, and the abandonment of thought specifically degrades internal autonomy.

Introspective thought does not promote efficiency, and thus must be eliminated. As Horkheimer and Adorno state, “in the end the transcendental subject of cognition is apparently abandoned as the last reminiscence of subjectivity and replaced by the much smoother work of automatic control mechanisms.”<sup>41</sup> Since free and uninfluenced thought on its own does not serve to reproduce the existing relations of production, does not promote the end of efficiency, and does not encourage conformity, it loses its usefulness and consequently its place in society. Continuing, they attribute this replacement to the positivist thinking which arose out of the Enlightenment. Positivism dismissed the existence and importance of anything lacking a scientifically quantifiable and empirical basis, and in its final state, Horkheimer and Adorno write, it “did not spare thought itself,” removing “the very last insulating instance between

---

<sup>40</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; repr., New York: Continuum, 2001), 30.

<sup>41</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 30.

individual behavior and the social norm.”<sup>42</sup> Without internal autonomy, or the capacity to think for oneself outside of the influence of society, the individual is no longer distinct or separated from the codes and mores of society. Once individuals lose their individuality, each can be replaced by another, and so what is true for one must be seen as true for all.

Horkheimer and Adorno find that this destruction of internal autonomy is produced and enforced by the elite, who need the masses to be cooperative and efficient so that the relations of production are kept intact. “By subjecting the whole of life to the demands of its maintenance, the dictatorial minority guarantees, together with its own security, the persistence of the whole.”

<sup>43</sup> This is an important addition to the problem of autonomy as articulated by the transcendentalists. Horkheimer and Adorno are similarly concerned with the domination of man and the tendency of society to render individuals objects for the good of the whole as Emerson and Thoreau, but offer a more complete picture of the problem as they find it to be specifically implemented by the elite in an attempt to control the masses.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno use the myth of Odysseus as an allegory that demonstrates the tendency of elite actors to use enlightenment systems of reason and technology to dominate and reduce the autonomy of the masses. When his ship encounters the Sirens, Odysseus instructs his crew to plug their ears so that they are immune to the seductive power of the Siren’s song, whereas he opts to listen immobilized, bound to the mast of the ship. The oarsmen “despite their closeness to things—cannot enjoy their labor because it is performed under pressure, in desperation, with senses stopped by force. The servant remains enslaved in

---

<sup>42</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 30.

<sup>43</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

body and soul....”<sup>44</sup> The oarsmen keep the ship moving towards the destination set by their ruler, who, unlike them, due to his removal from labor itself, is able to perceive reality.

Odysseus listens to the song of the Sirens while moving steadily towards his destination, remaining safe due to his fixed position above the laboring oarsmen. In this allegory, Odysseus’s position symbolizes the elite, who have the power that comes from knowledge of reality and do nothing to change it, whereas the oarsmen symbolize the masses of society; barred from apprehending the truth because of the potential for the ship of production to run off course if they do. As Horkheimer and Adorno write, “[t]he stopped ears which the pliable proletarians have retained ever since the time of myth have no advantage over the immobility of the master.”<sup>45</sup> Because the elite have security, they are able to “see things as they really are,” whereas the masses of society must be compelled into cooperation through stopped ears.

Deprived of the power that comes from knowledge of reality, unable to apprehend truth, the oarsmen of society are reduced to laboring bodies while Odysseus, who symbolizes the elite, directs their movement. Horkheimer and Adorno, explicating the higher meaning of the metaphor, write that men are made to be

mere species beings, exactly like one another through isolation in the forcibly united collectivity. The oarsmen, who cannot speak to one another, are each of them yoked in the same rhythm as the modern worker in the factory, movie theater, and collective. The actual working conditions in society compel conformism—not the conscious influences which also made the suppressed men dumb and separated them from truth.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 37.

Without the ability to see things as they truly are, made deaf through manipulation, the oarsmen are unable to realize any internal autonomy and, due to their lack of mental sovereignty, become interchangeable. Their human potential for originality obfuscated, they become “mere species beings”—as do modern workers in the factory, movie theater, and collective, unable to communicate with one another and made to conform due to the working conditions in society.

In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson gives the instruction: “Insist on yourself; never imitate.”<sup>47</sup> In *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno condemn the scientific study of individual social actors on the basis that the quantification of man en masse traps him, distilling his unique characteristics down into an imposed conformity, placing him into a grouping with others “like him,” and, through this incentivization to imitate, reduces his power to act autonomously. In a passage of *Eclipse of Reason* reminiscent of Emerson’s Old Fable of Man detailed in “The Great American Scholar,” Horkheimer explains the tendency of what he calls the “submissive individual” to mimic those around him rather than to act originally, and finds that this adaptation is both necessary in modern society and destructive to humanity: “By echoing, repeating, imitating his surroundings, by adapting himself to all the powerful groups to which he eventually belongs, by transforming himself from a human being into a member of organizations, by sacrificing his potentialities for the sake of readiness and ability to conform to and gain influence in such organizations, he manages to survive.”<sup>48</sup> Survival in the modern era does not necessitate independent thought or action—in fact, internal autonomy actively “others”

---

<sup>47</sup> Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, 199.

<sup>48</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 100.

the individual, and active-external autonomy is futile and meaningless without being realized in conjunction with a conscious will derived from the practice of internal autonomy.

While individuals might have once been able to effectively exercise control over their own existence, “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” or using their intellectual functions to think and act politically and economically whilst remaining autonomous in mind, their domination at the hands of an engineered society and the systemic conformity that deprives them of internal autonomy has left the masses—“oarsmen with stopped ears”—unable also to realize active-external autonomy. In “Eclipse of Reason,” Horkheimer states that in the modern era, the individual subject of reason clings to his “corporation, association, or union,” neglects his capacity for sovereignty of mind, and is no longer able to “transcend his actual position in reality.”<sup>49</sup> The individual’s intellectual functions “are now taken over by the great economic and social forces of the era. The future of the individual depends less and less upon his own prudence and more and more upon the national and international struggles among the colossi of power.”<sup>50</sup> Because the individual’s internal autonomy has been so dominated by the regime of the engineer, which fits him into a scheme and reduces him into a thing; his ears stopped with metaphorical wax, he no longer has any drive towards action over his conditions of existence; and instead lets himself be swept away by the tide of economic, political, and social forces that exist outside of him.

---

<sup>49</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> See note 49.

## CHAPTER THREE

INTERNAL AUTONOMY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

---

*“Just as a child repeats the words of his mother, and the youngster the brutal manners of the elders at whose hands he suffers, so the giant loudspeaker of industrial culture, blaring through commercialized recreation and popular advertising—which become more and more indistinguishable from each other—endlessly reduplicates the surface of reality.”—Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason**

Horkheimer and Adorno saw the technological innovations of the Enlightenment as processes which were initially intended to further progress and “the idea of man,” but instead led to the domination of the individual. The past few decades have seen the emergence of a new technology, a new “loudspeaker of industrial culture,” carrying with it new promises of a progressive ideal of human flourishing: the internet. The rapid development and expansion of this new form of media carried with it, like the Enlightenment, a utopian hope that perhaps democracy too could be advanced. Social media promised a public sphere where everyone, regardless of background, had permission to speak. Each user was now simultaneously writer, editor, and publisher; and without gatekeepers, physical barriers, or national borders, the virtual world had the potential to realize a true “marketplace of ideas.” However, the public sphere of social media formed a new realm of society, carrying with it the problems of conformity and lack of autonomy as explicated by Thoreau, Emerson, Horkheimer and Adorno. Similarly to the innovations of the Enlightenment, this new loudspeaker too has failed to deliver on any promises of furthering individual autonomy.

The age of social media has elevated public opinion to new heights and has simultaneously promoted the manipulation of opinion at levels hitherto unseen. This paradoxical push-and-pull between democratic progress (such as that seen in allowing the influx of previously unheard voices into the digital conversation) and instrumentalization (the algorithm that tracks, gatekeeps, and optimizes content based on rough sketches of human behavior) allows for the reduction of autonomy while simultaneously perpetrating an illusion of freedom that makes individuals unaware of their own unfreedom.

The average American lives their day-to-day existence immersed in a social-media enforced chronic connectedness and operating under the guise of a false dichotomy based on the proliferation of the two-party system. The entanglement of news and social media has led to an information-funneling system where, under the omnipotent eye of The Algorithm, each individual is lumped into some box and then fed content accordingly. The algorithm tracks us until it feels comfortable placing an appropriate label on our minds: liberal, conservative, religious, socialist. A college student at a private liberal arts university is spoon-fed the news through graphics with a leftist-slant on them. Opinions are funneled to the rural farmer through a tone that resonates more with him. One could imagine an individual in the days of yore receiving their newspaper in the solitude of their own home, reading it carefully, and then coming to their own opinion about whatever matter was up for deliberation. Now, through the proliferation of the two-party system and the Gordian Knot produced by the interlacing of social media and news, society is paradoxically both increasingly homogenous and divided in thought—split in half between the two dominating political parties and isolated from dissenting ideas, individuals are

overexposed to the opinions of others “like them” and encouraged to conform their thought with that of those around them.

Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that reason, once an objective concept, has become instrumentalized. The effect of this reconfiguration has been that individuals no longer practice introspective thought in order to determine their views, but rather source their opinions from that which they see echoed around them. This phenomenon has only been expedited by the imposition of social media. As individuals retreat further into “echo chambers” and “political bubbles,” the majority opinion of their peers becomes seen as the “correct” opinion, replacing objective reason and the foundational virtues which used to characterize society. But how can we be surprised? The new realm of society created by social media necessitates reduction as its initiation ritual: reduce your name into a username, reduce your story into a bio, reduce your emotions into a “like,” a “dislike,” a “retweet.”

Social media has encouraged individuals to conform their dress, their taste in design, in art, in music, in humor, and yes, their political opinions, to fit amongst the herd that they see around them. It functions as an “Ideological State Apparatus,” a concept coined by Althusser in “On the Reproduction of Capitalism” that serves to reproduce the existing relations of production in the consciousness of individuals, implanting the dominant ideology of the state into the minds of its subjects which “makes the system go all by itself.”

This may well be the most democratic age ever seen—but how free are we as individuals? How autonomous are we really? Horkheimer states that this phenomenon, (and keep in mind, he was writing when we were still in the age of telegrams and radio), which he calls an “illusory triumph of democratic progress” works to consume “the intellectual substance on which



democracy has lived.”<sup>51</sup> Without deliberative thought, conditioned by overexposure to social media, and quantified en masse, individuals living in the modern era are deterred from the practice of internal autonomy. For the sake of efficiency, truth has become synonymous in the minds of the masses with “correctness” and in the social media age, when information is fed to the world through reductive and slanted infographics and sensationalized videos, individuals are disincentivized from the practice of internal autonomy as explained by the transcendentalists for fear of going against the grain of what is seen as correct. As Horkheimer puts it, “[t]he very idea of truth has been reduced to the purpose of a useful tool in the control of nature, and the realization of the infinite potentialities inherent in man has been relegated to the status of a luxury.”<sup>52</sup> Just as the oarsmen with stopped ears in the myth of Odysseus, the imagination of the masses today atrophies.

This chapter explores social media’s effect on the internal autonomy of individuals in the modern era. Part One, “The Gordian Knot of Social Media and News,” addresses the pollution of news due to its entanglement with social media. Part Two, “Conformity of Mind and the War on Ideological Difference,” addresses the broader trend of ideological conformity, expedited by the Coronavirus pandemic and “cancel culture.”

### The Gordian Knot of Social Media and News

Emerson and Thoreau find that the most important counter to the dangers of society is education. A well informed public, they argue, is essential to the cultivation of autonomy. Knowledge today has become a commodity available for purchase only by those with sufficient

---

<sup>51</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 101.

means. The paywall that confronts an individual seeking information is a direct continuation of the wax used to plug the ears of the oarsmen in the myth of Odysseus as interpreted by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—only those secured and bound to the mast of their elevated social position can afford to see things as they really are by reading *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or *The Wall Street Journal*. And, of course, because one media outlet might be biased, one can come closer to apprehending reality by amassing as many subscriptions as possible. Those who cannot afford to pay for even one news subscription are relegated to consuming their news through free mediums—62 percent of US adults now consume news through social media, with 44 percent of the total adult population sourcing their news directly from Facebook,<sup>53</sup> a forum not conducive to the cultivation of internal autonomy. Yes, free and reliable news is in fact available to the masses, but why would you go out of your way to read a boring and dryly worded article by the *Associated Press* when you could instead retweet your Uncle Jerry’s thrilling commentary on the newest InfoWars release?

As explained in the previous chapter, the Enlightenment’s substitution of subjective reason in the place of objective reason led to the uprooting of societal virtues and after the industrial revolution left, in their place, efficiency as the primordial end goal of all things. News media has not been unaffected by this development. Lee McIntyre notes in his book *Post-Truth* that “the rise of social media as a source of news blurred the lines even further between news and opinion... Why pay for a newspaper subscription when you could get as many stories as you wanted from friends that had just as much to say about the events you were interested in?”<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Lee C. McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 94.

<sup>54</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 93–94.

Education and knowledge must be made to be efficient, and so in our age of chronic stimulation information must be condensed in order for it to be consumed by the masses. Stories become headlines; entire schools of thought, infographics; and context disappears altogether. McIntyre writes that “[i]f we get our news from social media, we can tune out those sources we don’t like, just as we can unfriend people who disagree with our political opinions. Whether our news feeds are reliable or fact free will depend on vetting by our friends and the algorithm that Facebook uses to decide which news stories we will ‘like’ more than others.”<sup>55</sup>

In *Digital Democracy, Social Media, and Disinformation*, Petros Iosifidis and Nicholas Nicoli write that news media has historically played a vital role in “the spread of diverse opinions and the enhancement of the public sphere.”<sup>56</sup> Printed media, i.e. newspapers in particular “provided a channel through which citizens could inform themselves about political matters, express their views and also communicate any concerns to the general public. The appearance of the first newspapers assumed an important role in the way the public sphere debated political and social matters.”<sup>57</sup> The availability of newspapers led to “more freedom and the creation of public opinion.”<sup>58</sup> For the first time, individuals had access to pure information about current events untainted by opinion. However, they note, printed media began to fall prey to trends of commodification in the twentieth century, and while newspapers initially were an ideal tool in the battle for autonomy because all citizens now had access to information, Iosifidis

---

<sup>55</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 94-95.

<sup>56</sup> Petros Iosifidis and Nicholas Nicoli, *Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation* (Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 16.

<sup>57</sup> Iosifidis and Nicoli, *Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation*, 16.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

and Nicoli note that the emergence of the independent press “came to function increasingly as a tool for managing and manipulating public opinion.”<sup>59</sup> I find that the same phenomenon has been taken to new heights with the entanglement of news and social media. As McIntyre notes, “the rich and the powerful have always had an interest (and usually a means) for getting the ‘little people’ to think what they wanted.”<sup>60</sup>

The interjection of news into the realm of social media has forced it to contort its form—because social media is meant to be engaging, in order to be consumed information must advertise and sell itself. Content must be entertaining, shareable, and palatable in order for news platforms to make money. Additionally, if an individual is sourcing their news from social media sites such as “Instagram,” “Facebook,” and “Twitter,” it becomes almost impossible to divorce the content matter from the opinions of others. Instead of consuming news about current events in isolation, and forming one's opinion about it introspectively before engaging in discourse about the given topic, the consumption and discourse happens simultaneously, polluting any purity that the information holds in itself. In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer writes that “[t]hought that does not serve the interests of any established group or is not pertinent to the business of any industry has no place, is considered vain or superfluous.”<sup>61</sup> Because news sites are heavily incentivized to make profits, impartiality remains evasive.

---

<sup>59</sup> Iosifidis and Nicoli, *Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation*, 16.

<sup>60</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 103.

<sup>61</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 101.

## Conformity of Mind and The War on Ideological Difference

In the midst of the covid-summer of 2020, *Harper's Magazine* published a short letter. “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate” was a response to the growing social phenomenon of “cancel culture,” which had taken on new heights during the pandemic. The threat of Coronavirus led to a national response codifying conformity; the “rule of the engineer” materializing in the form of Dr. Anthony Fauci. Quarantined and physically isolated, social media became, for the first time, the premiere venue for socialization—and as a public sphere, could not escape the problems of society as explained in the first two chapters of this project.

Social media has evolved beyond recreation. The virtual realm is now a public sphere in itself, an open forum and, in an ideal sense, a “marketplace of ideas.” The emergence of the internet marked a significant opportunity for the expansion of democracy worldwide, as anyone, regardless of background, now had a platform from which to speak. But during the pandemic, in spite of our physical isolation, we began to be immersed in ideological conformity; split between the two preeminent political parties as diverging opinions about the pandemic became increasingly politicized.

The pandemic elevated both mental conformity and division in thought. At least since Trump, political opinion has been conflated with morality on both sides of the aisle, and the physical isolation of the pandemic hindered the practice of cross-political discourse. In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer writes that “[t]he more the judgment of the people is manipulated by all kinds of interests, the more is the majority presented as the arbiter in cultural life...The greater the extent to which scientific propaganda makes of public opinion a mere tool for obscure forces,

the more does public opinion appear a substitute for reason.”<sup>62</sup> At least since the coronavirus pandemic, and perhaps since the emergence of the smartphone altogether—and perhaps even before that, the virtual realm replaced the town square as the location where “cultural life” is built, learned, and maintained. The algorithm quickly learned that online users want to consume content that supports their own predetermined biases, and so when we enter the virtual world we do not get an accurate sense of the true “majority opinion,” but instead get sucked into the majority opinion of our societal sector: the “coastal elite” majority opinion, the “rural working-class” majority opinion, the “pro-life evangelical” majority opinion, or even the “post-woke neo-hipster Gen-Z reactionarily red-pilled” one. And all of these majority opinions, besides perhaps the last one, are funded and pushed out from someone or some place with something to gain.

Rather than prompting individuals to source their opinions from original and introspective thought, physical isolation in the era of social media moved them to immerse themselves in the public sphere of the internet. This could have been an opportunity for an elevated level of internal autonomy in the masses due to the inherent democratic nature of the internet, but the presence of algorithmic mechanisms and the modern inclination towards “confirmation bias,” “echo chambers,” and radicalization has led to the opposite effect. The algorithm optimizes as it tracks each individual’s internet consumption, tailoring the content presented to each person according to what it “thinks” they might want to interact with. This process necessitates the distillation of the unique individual into the lowest common denominator that groups them in with others. As one’s internet consumption goes on, the algorithm garners

---

<sup>62</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 20.

more and more data about the content that that individual might interact with and, based on its data about other individuals who virtually interact in similar ways, fits them into a scheme.

This practice transfers the centuries-old problem depicted in Emerson's "Old Fable of Man" to the modern era—reducing man from his singularity into an object, and thus degrading individual humanity. Additionally, this phenomenon is a self-fulfilling prophecy: while the initial "lumping" of the individual into a box might be false, through prolonged exposure to the content deemed suitable for him the individual will begin to adopt the traits and interests of the rest of the herd amongst him. And how can we blame him? Once the individual has, through prolonged social media usage, learned to distill his complex range of emotions down into "like" "dislike" "question" "emphasize" and "love," he begins to understand that emotions and thoughts are icons presented to him, and that the one he's feeling is whichever choice makes the most sense in the given moment.

The presentation of the majority opinion as the moral arbiter of right and wrong and the simultaneous dissolution of the individual's capacity for internal autonomy is the foundation of what we have come to know as "cancel culture." The Harper's Letter opens by applauding the "needed reckoning" that resulted from protests for racial and social justice, demands for police reform, and calls for equity and inclusion, but states that this reckoning simultaneously "intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity."<sup>63</sup> As one plunges deeper into the internet culture that the algorithm and the people they are virtually connected with produce, there is an increasing pressure to conform their opinions with what they

---

<sup>63</sup> "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate | Harper's Magazine," *Harper's Magazine*, July 7, 2020, <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>.

observe circulating around them. Observing how those around them react to the presence of diverging opinions, which more and more becomes outright “cancellation,” the individual obediently falls in line.

The letter continues, “censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.”<sup>64</sup> Since the reconfiguration of reason (as explained in Chapter Two), foundational virtues of society have been replaced by efficiency. A plurality of opinion, while beneficial for a democratic society, does not promote an efficient one. Nuance, gray areas, and even the existence of what once used to be called “opinion” dies. In their place we can now find the “correct” opinion and the “incorrect” one; facts and lies; good and bad. This is not to say that we live in a country with homogeneity in thought—it is commonly noted that we live in one of the most politically divided eras in American History. But increasingly we are divided on strictly delineated blue-and-red lines, and nuance has died on these lines as well.

The result of cancel culture, the Harper's Letter states, “...has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement.”<sup>65</sup> Plurality of thought now bears with it the threat of losing one's right to speak at all.

---

<sup>64</sup> “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate | Harper’s Magazine.”

<sup>65</sup> “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate | Harper’s Magazine.”



One response to the letter, from “The Objective,”—a somewhat ironically named non-profit newsroom intended to build “collective and narrative power for communities that have been misrepresented or dismissed in order to change the way journalism is practiced in the U.S.”<sup>66</sup>—dismissed the letter on the basis that most of the signatories came from positions of power: “The signatories, many of them white, wealthy, and endowed with massive platforms, argue that they are afraid of being silenced, that so-called cancel culture is out of control, and that they fear for their jobs and free exchange of ideas, even as they speak from one of the most prestigious magazines in the country.”<sup>67</sup> This kind of reductive response is emblematic of the school of thought born out of cancel culture and wokeism.

The response continues, “In truth, Black, brown, and LGBTQ+ people — particularly Black and trans people — can now critique elites publicly and hold them accountable socially; this seems to be the letter’s greatest concern.”<sup>68</sup> Rather than take the Harper’s letter at its word, which advocates explicitly for individuals without power: “The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation”<sup>69</sup>, the “objective” response attacks the signatories on the basis of their background, reducing the individual into a type based only on “seems to be.”

---

<sup>66</sup> “About Us,” *The Objective*, accessed May 2, 2023, <https://objectivejournalism.org/about/>.

<sup>67</sup> “A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate,” *The Objective*, July 10, 2020, <https://objectivejournalism.org/2020/07/a-more-specific-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>.

<sup>68</sup> “A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate.”

<sup>69</sup> “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate | Harper’s Magazine.”

The cultural attitude of today encourages identification. In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer states that “[m]an emerged as an individual when society began to lose its cohesiveness and he became aware of the difference between his life and that of the seemingly eternal collectivity.”<sup>70</sup> Today, the opposite effect has taken place: coercive identification undermines individuality by manufacturing a false sense of homogeneity. Identification, like the algorithm, tends to reduce individuals by rendering them unaware of the difference between their life and that of the collectivity to which they subscribe. Thoughtless identification renders uniqueness and originality invisible, flattening the individual into a type. To be explicitly clear, this is not to say that identity groups are not important or meaningful. The danger comes when one aspect of a person’s identity subsumes the whole. Like the great American poet Walt Whitman, all individuals contain multitudes. McIntyre put it well: “How ironic that the Internet, which allows for immediate access to reliable information by anyone who bothers to look for it, has for some become nothing but an echo chamber.”<sup>71</sup>

The reduction of internal autonomy by the (virtual) hands of social media has dire implications. Thought no longer holds merit based on introspection, but only in terms of how well it conforms to the predominant opinion of those in the same echo chamber. Conformity of thought is about survival. And as Horkheimer wrote in *Eclipse of Reason*, “the individual is nothing but a biological specimen as long as he is merely the incarnation of an ego defined by the co-ordination of his functions in the service of self-preservation.”<sup>72</sup> By neglecting his

---

<sup>70</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 97.

<sup>71</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 95.

<sup>72</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 97.

potential for introspective and original thought, or internal autonomy, the individual undermines his very humanity.

In order to possess internal autonomy, individuals must be able to exercise their capacity for free and uninfluenced thought, which can only occur in moments of tranquility. These moments have become ever more elusive since the imposition of the iPhone. Entertainment is the most accessible that it has ever been in human history—mental stimulation is just a few taps away! Every moment of our day that might have been used for thought has now been consumed by virtual sound-images. We wake up, reach for our phone, and consume content. We walk to the bathroom, scrolling. With our mind in the virtual realm we sit on the toilet and brush our teeth and put on music while we shower—thank god, most phones aren't completely waterproof just yet and we must protect them or else this fleeting moment might also be colonized by the angry and unruly Twitter or TikTok hordes—then get dressed and have coffee and eat breakfast and walk to the train and get on it, find a seat and keep scrolling and keep tapping and all the while, most likely, we've not a single thought to show for it. If leisure really is the mother of philosophy, she left home to go out and buy a gallon of milk, a pack of smokes, and a smartphone in 2007 and never came back. And the orphaned, pathetic thought of the masses, hopeless, neglected, and yearning for community, has ever since been looking for love in all the wrong places.

## CHAPTER FOUR

SMOLDERING RESENTMENT WITH NOWHERE TO GO: ACTIVE-EXTERNAL  
AUTONOMY TODAY

---

*“Man’s likeness to God consists in sovereignty over existence, in the countenance of the lord and master, and in command.”—Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment**

*“While the masses think of themselves as the creators of their own destiny, they are the objects of their leaders.”—Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason**

First, let us remember how we got here, so as not to get turned-around. In Chapter One, I outlined Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Old Fable of Man,” and how in the post-industrial revolution division of labor, individuals become objectified because they are viewed as valuable only in terms of their productive output, rather than as ends in themselves. My conception of what it means to be autonomous is rooted in transcendental thought; Emerson and Henry David Thoreau both extol the necessities of creative and original thought and action. In my understanding, in order for an individual to be autonomous, he must possess both internal autonomy, which is the capacity for and the process of introspective and deliberative thought uninfluenced by societal opinion, as well as active-external autonomy. Once an individual has, through introspection, come to his own opinion about a given thing, he must act in accordance with his will—only through both conscious thought and action can an individual be considered autonomous.

In Chapter Two, I analyzed the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, both of whom I believe are writing about many of the same issues as the transcendentalists. However, they apply these problems to phenomena amidst the rise of mass democracy and industrial

capitalism. Chapter Two introduced the concepts of the reconfiguration of reason after the enlightenment and the replacement of liberty and equality—the foundational virtues of governance—by efficiency. Chapter Two also explores the “rule of the engineer,” which treats individuals as means rather than ends in themselves and thus reduces them from human beings to objects of social and economic control. I also introduce Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the myth of Odysseus, in which they find that the masses of society are deafened to reality through elite manipulation, and deprived of autonomy.

In Chapter Three I began my analysis of the modern era and applied some of the concepts explicated in the first half of this thesis to the current degradation of internal autonomy today. I argued that the imposition of social media into the everyday world of the individual has created a new public sphere that works to encourage conformity of mind and robs individuals of their capacity for internal autonomy. The entanglement of news media and entertainment content has deprived individuals of opportunities for introspective thought insulated from external opinions, and the trend of “cancel culture” functions as an efficient scare tactic to discourage individuals from voicing non-conforming opinions.

Active-external autonomy has been rendered superfluous for the masses in society today because of the current degradation of internal autonomy. Internal autonomy is the necessary first step to full autonomy because one cannot act in accordance with their will if an autonomous will isn’t there in the first place. But for the most part, even mentally sovereign individuals are unable to realize full autonomy in the modern era because of systemic blocks made towards the realization of active-external autonomy in society today.

We can see these roadblocks to full autonomy in a number of features of contemporary society. No matter how well low-income individuals are able to realize their own internal autonomy, they are left unable to be autonomous in action due to their lack of material support. In other words, active-external autonomy is possible in the current state of American affairs, but exists only as a luxury commodity for the few who already have the material wealth to live in accordance with their internal autonomy. Similarly, the influx of money into the political sphere; the “gamification” of politics; the proliferation of the two party system; the perpetration of scientific methods in political study; and the demise of the labor movement have all undermined individual autonomy in the modern era.

Because the transcendentalists did not confront the systematic obstacles of mass society, the idea of autonomy they explicated rings hollow for the masses, those who confront systematic blocks to actualizing their autonomy. Integration into the societal order is necessary for the majority of the populace because the financial burden of existence in American society necessitates labor, with the exception of the few who already have the economic means to live in “voluntary poverty” as encouraged by Thoreau in *Walden*. Without the means to live outside of society and systemically deprived of their capacity for internal autonomy, individuals are forced into cooperation with the existing system.

In this concluding chapter of my Senior Project, I analyze the individual’s capacity for the realization of active-external autonomy in the modern era. In Part One, “New Era, Same Old Fable: Active-External Autonomy in the 4HL,” I analyze the state of active-external autonomy in labor today. In Part Two, “More Money, Less Virtue: The Gamification of Politics,” I postulate that politics no longer serves as a route through which individuals can realize active-external

autonomy because of the influx of money into campaigns and the resulting “gamification” of politics. Finally, in Part Three, “On the Necessity of Social Integration in Pursuit of Autonomy,” I argue that the only way out is through conscious social integration.

#### New Era, Same Old Fable: Active-External Autonomy in the 4HL

A modern conception of Emerson’s Old Fable of Man can be found in the popular Twitter phrase, “The 4 Hour Life,” originated by Paul Skallas. Skallas, a technology lawyer and twitter personality, first used the term in a tweet on November 27th, 2018: “You work a job / 8 hours sleep / 8 hours work / 4 hours exercise/meals/family/friends / You got 4 hours left / What’re you gonna do in that 4 hour life bro?”<sup>73</sup> The term did not garner popular awareness until sometime in the past year, but now, a quick scroll through twitter on a Friday afternoon will commonly find (at least, in my personal corner of The Algorithm) tweets with some iteration of “Friday in the 4HL, you can really feel the pull of the weekend.” In this framing of modern day existence, for “4HLers,”<sup>74</sup> or individuals who are so dominated by their work that they only “own” four hours of their day, the 24 hour day has been reduced down into a four hour slot in which their life finally belongs to no one but themselves. Only four hours a day dedicated to the cultivation of the individual self!—but of course, because of the constant availability of stimulation as explained in the previous chapter, these four hours are most likely dominated by thoughtless entertainment. For 4HLers, the two-day weekend provides the only space where active-external autonomy has the potential to be realized, hence the “pull of the weekend.” While the 4HL is by

---

<sup>73</sup> “4 Hour Life / 4HL,” *Know Your Meme*, February 1, 2023, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/4-hour-life-4hl>.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Skallas, “4 Hour Life Glossary,” *Medium*, March 1, 2020, <https://medium.com/@pskallas/4-hour-life-glossary-4740bca6412>. Skallas’s definition of “The 4HLer”: “The salary man, employee, wage earner or company man. No equity or upside from a sale. Not the owner. No payoff.”

no measure an academic term, it is worth examining nonetheless because its burgeoning online popularity signifies a growing resentment towards the state of labor today.

In the 4HL, as in Emerson's Old Fable, the individual is "metamorphosed into a thing"—at least for 8 hours a day. The individual life is relegated to the background; living happens only behind the scenes and on the sidelines of work. If we are to understand active-external autonomy as the state of having control over your own conditions of existence and the feeling that, at least to some degree, your choices matter, the 4HL does not really provide for it. In accordance with Emerson's Old Fable, it is essential for the individual life to matter more than his labor, and in the distribution of hours as explained by Skallas, this is an impossibility.

It is important to note that individuals who find "dignity in their ministry" are not 4HLers. Academics, writers, politicians, CEOs, and other individuals who—whether self-employed or not—are able to utilize their full human potential for creative and original action and get paid for it (above the bare means of subsistence) live, in Skallas's terminology, the "twelve hour life." We should all be so lucky—the main problem for individuals living the 4HL isn't necessarily that they are working, but that they are working in jobs that are meaningless to their lives and the lives of others.

By spending most of their waking hours working a job meaningless to them, 4HLers reject their intrinsic capacity to be ends in themselves, reducing themselves to being objects in service to some predetermined end and consequently conforming. As Emerson states in "The American Scholar," "labor is everywhere welcome; always we are invited to work; only be this limitation observed, that a man shall not for the sake of wider activity sacrifice any opinion to the



popular judgments and modes of action.”<sup>75</sup> The eight hours a day dedicated to work creates a negative space in the lives of 4HLers, a void of time that they will never get back; and in order to fulfill their roles at work they must necessarily leave their individual selves at home, putting on the costume and mask of the dutiful employee.

The meaninglessness of labor for 4HLers is described in David Graeber’s 2018 book entitled *Bullshit Jobs: The Rise of Pointless Work and What We Can Do About it*. In it he postulates that the advancement of technology has been such that we should by now have achieved a fifteen-hour work week.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, most of the people working in modern society today are still, as Paul Skallas would say, “living in the 4HL,” many of them in jobs that they find utterly meaningless. Graeber defines a “bullshit job” as a “form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.”<sup>77</sup> An individual working in a bullshit job sacrifices half of his waking hours—and more if we take his commute into account!—to a purpose he finds absolutely devoid of meaning. The paycheck subsumes the soul, and without creative action, the individual is reduced into a thing.

Graeber specifies that bullshit jobs are different from “shit jobs” because the latter type are typically difficult, labor-intensive, underpaid, yet necessary—and the former are none of those things. “Bullshit jobs often pay quite well and tend to offer excellent working conditions. They’re just pointless. Shit jobs are usually not at all bullshit; they typically involve work that

---

<sup>75</sup> Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, 95.

<sup>76</sup> David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), xiv.

<sup>77</sup> Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 10.

needs to be done and is clearly of benefit to society; it's just that the workers who do them are paid and treated badly."<sup>78</sup> Bullshit jobs and "shit" ones are two separate problems in the labor force today and both are powerful forces against the realization of active-external autonomy.

Both forms of work dominate the individual through their relegation of "real life" to the background, as postulated by the premise of "the 4HL," but the subtle domination of bullshit jobs is perhaps more comparable to the type of undignified labor Emerson details in his Old Fable. "Shit jobs"<sup>79</sup> dominate the individual explicitly through their typically offensively meager pay; and while the strength of unions once allowed for individuals working in traditionally laborious roles to realize active-external autonomy outside of work, their slow demise has left individuals working in "shit jobs" without enough material support to make it worthwhile in terms of autonomy. Graeber states that while "once left-wing political parties at least claimed to represent factory workers, nowadays, all such pretense has been discarded, and they have come to be dominated by the professional-managerial classes that run institutions like schools and hospitals."<sup>80</sup> Because bullshit jobs tend to pay well, the people working them are able to realize some active-external autonomy through participation in traditional party politics, which caters to the professional managerial class, whereas those working in "shit jobs" have been forgotten about in electoral politics due to the influx of money into campaigns.

"Shit jobs" have more or less always existed. But as society has become increasingly focused on efficiency as the end goal of all things under the rule of the engineer, unions have

---

<sup>78</sup> Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> I'm keeping quotations around the term "shit jobs" because I find it degrading to meaningful and underpaid work, whereas I'm freeing the term bullshit jobs from its quotation jail because I do in fact find these jobs to be bullshit.

<sup>80</sup> Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 267.

deteriorated, working-class politics have been put to rout; and whereas some of these “shit” jobs once promised good pay, pensions, and retirement plans, these benefits are being eliminated because they are not conducive to maximum efficiency.

An example of a uniquely modern “shit job” can be found in the Amazon warehouse. A piece from CNBC reports that Douglas Parker, assistant secretary of Labor for occupational safety and health, stated that inspections into Amazon’s warehouses “found work processes that were designed for speed but not safety... While Amazon has developed impressive systems to make sure its customers’ orders are shipped efficiently and quickly, the company has failed to show the same level of commitment to protecting the safety and well-being of its workers.”<sup>81</sup> Under the rule of the engineer as explained in Chapter Two, efficiency has replaced other foundational virtues of American society, and the well-being of individuals has fallen in importance in comparison to the maintenance of the well-oiled machine of capitalism.

#### More Money, Less Virtue: The Gamification of Politics

The influx of money into electoral politics following the supreme court case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* changed the nature of campaigns. While the wealthy have always had undue influence in the realm of politics, the court ruling that political spending was a form of speech protected under the First Amendment codified this hierarchy into empirical reality. Corporations and other outsized groups now have the right to spend as much money as they like on political campaigns, so long as their coordination with candidates or political parties

---

<sup>81</sup> Annie Palmer, “Amazon Cited by Labor Department for Exposing Warehouse Workers to Safety Hazards,” *CNBC*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/18/amazon-cited-by-osha-for-exposing-warehouse-workers-to-safety-hazards.html>.

remains informal.<sup>82</sup> The effects of the decision have been astronomical, furthering the already existing objectification of individuals under government and reducing the masses even further into a field of means. As was expected after the decision, the influence of for-profit corporations has certainly increased, but the largest influx of money has been delivered due to the emergence of super PACs and “dark money groups.” In a report for the Brennan Center written only five years after the decision, Daniel Weiner notes that “thanks to super PACs and a variety of other entities that can raise unlimited funds after Citizens United — the biggest money (that can be traced) has come from an elite club of wealthy mega-donors. These individuals — fewer than 200 people and their spouses — have bankrolled nearly 60 percent of all super PAC spending since 2010.”<sup>83</sup>

This elite club has only gotten more exclusive: in the 2018 midterm election cycle, the top 100 donors to super PACs contributed nearly 78 percent of all super PAC spending.<sup>84</sup> It would be foolish to believe that these 100 individuals, who hold so much power, are using their resources to better the conditions of the masses. Henry David Thoreau perhaps put it best when he wrote that the rich man “is always sold to the institution which makes him rich. Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects, and obtains them for him; it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it...his moral ground is taken from under his feet.”<sup>85</sup> An election system skewed this drastically in favor of the ultra-elite can

---

<sup>82</sup> Tim Lau, “Citizens United Explained | Brennan Center for Justice” (The Brennan Center for Justice, 2019), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained>.

<sup>83</sup> Daniel Weiner, “Citizens United Five Years Later | Brennan Center for Justice,” 2015, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-five-years-later>.

<sup>84</sup> Lau, “Citizens United Explained | Brennan Center for Justice.”

<sup>85</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” 1849.

only reinforce economic stratification. Any politician elected because of their well-funded elite campaign would have to be a true martyr to do away with the system that led them to power—and politicians do not tend to be heroes. It's very simple: Citizens United equated money with speech, and this conflation means in practice that the more money you have, the more speech, and subsequently the more freedom—or, active-external autonomy.

While political processes operate under the illusion that individuals can have some say in the ways in which their lives progress, utilizing their power to vote in order to determine their circumstances of existence, the influx of money into the political system has made electoral politics into a sort of game that renders individual autonomy superfluous. Politicians do not need to ensure that their agenda lines up with the true interests of the masses—all that they need to do to be competitive now is raise enough money to be able to sufficiently manipulate the populace better than their opponent. While the vote may have once been conceived as a route through which individuals could actualize their autonomy, it no longer carries the same weight. Politics has become an epic game, and 200 years out from the institution of the Constitution as the supreme law of the land, the strategies surrounding the electoral procedure and political processes have been perfected: through extensive trial and error, “players” have unveiled all of the shortcuts and tinkered bit by bit with the rules through intralegal renovation in order to perfect their chances of achieving their desired outcome—which is usually power, and the maintenance of the system that elevated them to it.

Playing the game requires politicians to use citizens as pawns. The more pawns influenced, manipulated, and collected, the better rendered their odds of success. Each electoral cycle commences a new round, the completion of which garners new data with which players

can perfect even more their strategy. Political Science courses teach this: pages of American Politics textbooks are filled with rules, strategies, and “facts” about the populace: Who tends to vote? Which kinds of people are the most important to influence? And which issues will most incite those people? For citizens, those who are being played with, this study is objectifying. Before you have even made a move towards the ballot, man’s chief tool of governmentally institutionalized autonomy, you’ve been analyzed, schematized, evaluated, and your ultimate choice has been predicted. The game of politics is predicated on a foundational assumption that individual voting patterns are predictable, that every individual is, more or less, the same.

This is not necessarily a new phenomenon. In fact, it’s been happening since at least 1837—in “The American Scholar,” Emerson asks, “Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit;—not to be reckoned one character;—not to yield that particular fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong; and our opinion predicted geographically, as the north, or the south?”<sup>86</sup> Political scientists have only fine tuned their skills. The amount of boxes citizens can be placed in has only increased. Instead of a simple division between north and south, individual opinions can now be predicted through age, race, class, religion, educational attainment, gender, sexuality, social media usage, hobbies, organizational involvement, personality type, state, county, city, district, neighborhood, street on which they live. This quantification reduces the individual from an autonomous being capable of making whatever choice in vote they so please to an object lumped in with the rest of the populace who fill up the same box as they do.

---

<sup>86</sup> Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, 104.

This faux-scientific quantification only functions through conformity, and if this conformity does not already exist empirically, it is manufactured as a result of this assumption. As Horkheimer and Adorno explicate in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “[t]he unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual: for individuality makes a mockery of the kind of society which would turn all individuals to the one collective.”<sup>87</sup> Surely, the joy felt from being part of a community, from the exchange of ideas and the sense of agency experienced through participation in politics cannot be overstated, but when the dialogue is polluted by the domination of elite actors, this feeling of collectivity becomes poisoned. A community built and maintained through coercion and manipulation is not one in which autonomy can thrive.

This phenomenon has only been expedited by the proliferation of the two-party system. Independent parties do not stand a chance in any major elections today, and both Republicans and Democrats—especially after *Citizens United*—are at the beck and call of whatever elite actors are funneling them money. When confronted with their ballot today, Americans are forced to choose between two basically identical visions of governance masquerading as opposites through aesthetic design choices. Will you choose guns or abortion? To bail out the oil companies or to bail out the banks? An increased military budget or an increased military budget? A glass of water in the blue cup or in the red one? Because candidates can only be made viable if they are backed by elite actors, either choice will ultimately stand for the maintenance of the system that got them to power in the first place. The vote becomes impotent, a futile attempt at implementing any control over one's conditions of existence. Government, though it

---

<sup>87</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 13.

should be a means to the end of the wellbeing of its citizens, becomes an end in itself, functioning only to sustain the existing hierarchical relations of society. And its citizens reduced into means through which the end of government is reproduced, mere objects subject to manipulation and broken promises.

#### On the Necessity of Social Integration in Pursuit of Autonomy

The transcendentalist solution to the issue of governmental infringement upon autonomy is the reduction of government. In “Politics,” Emerson writes that “the less government we have, the better, -- the fewer laws, and the less confided power. The antidote to this abuse of formal Government, is, the influence of private character, the growth of the Individual.” While the reduction of government in order to secure autonomy might be appealing in a society without inequality, this solution in a nation characterized by economic inequality will only further existing trends of stratification between classes. With the power of the vote undermined by the influx of money into the political game, no matter how internally autonomous individuals become they will be unable to realize active-external autonomy without the possession of material means of subsistence.

Internal autonomy is impotent in society when systemic blocks are made towards the realization of active-external autonomy. The transcendentalist vision of the democratic individual can be reconciled with government, but only in a society unencumbered by economic inequality. While it may seem counterintuitive to the teachings of transcendentalist thought, I believe that in the modern era the only way for individuals to realize the full breadth of human autonomy—as defined by Emerson and Thoreau—is through social integration and cooperation. I also believe that the practice of conscious social integration does not run counter to transcendentalist ideals;



in fact, social integration is encouraged by their writings, which extol the virtues of mental sovereignty above physical isolation. What the transcendentalists are most wary of is not, as they are commonly thought to suggest, the involvement of individuals in community, but rather the tendency of social integration to dominate and reduce the individual into a field of means, mindless and valuable only in terms of productive output.

Our current era is one in which social integration is necessary and unavoidable for the masses; so instead of arguing for the impossible solution of physical isolation, it seems to make more sense to find a way to reconcile the autonomous individual with involvement in society. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, physical isolation in the modern era cannot escape the dangers of society due to the virtual imposition of social media into the life of even the physically isolated individual. Additionally, even were it possible for individuals to fully retreat physically from the woes of society, this isolation would harm the individual more than it would help. Humans are social beings, and so much of the good that comes from existence exists with and through the presence of others. Love, friendship, justice, sorrow, joy, hope, fun! These are all necessary and important aspects of life, and while they may still exist in the absence of social integration, they illuminate the life-spirit of the individual only hollowly, shallowly; if experienced without others, the gleam of feeling lends a dull cast upon the soul of the individual in isolation—no matter how autonomous he might be. Individuals must be able to obtain “spiritual isolation” i.e. internal autonomy, while simultaneously achieving enough control over their conditions of existence—whilst still in society— so that active-external autonomy is realized as well.

Horkheimer and Adorno, who I believe are writing about the same problem as the Transcendentalists over a century later, praise the virtues of autonomy but, in contrast to Emerson and Thoreau, do not find that the individual should retreat from society in order to realize it. Horkheimer writes that by “relinquishing his prerogative of shaping reality in the image of truth, the individual submits himself to tyranny.”<sup>88</sup> The dissociation of the individual from the community reinforces the domination of individuality because the individual has, to put it bluntly, given up and given in, allowing his life to be determined for him instead of by him.

In *Bullshit Jobs*, Graeber too equates social interaction with human agency, and writes that “[h]umans are social beings that begin to atrophy...if they are denied regular contact with other humans; insofar as they do have a sense of being an autonomous entity separate from the world and from others, it is largely from conceiving themselves as capable of acting on the world and others...Deny humans this sense of agency, and they are nothing.”<sup>89</sup> Graeber cites research that individuals put into solitary confinement for more than six months begin to exhibit physically observable forms of brain damage.<sup>90</sup> This is important: not only are individuals metaphorically dehumanized when deprived of autonomy, as Emerson postulated in “The American Scholar,” they also bear marks of physical damage from this domination. In this conception of what it means to be autonomous, social interaction is not just beneficial for the individual but absolutely necessary.

---

<sup>88</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 96.

<sup>89</sup> Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 101–2.

<sup>90</sup> Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 82.

Horkheimer explains that as the ordinary man withdraws from political participation, “society tends to revert to the law of the jungle, which crushes all vestiges of individuality. The absolutely isolated individual has always been an illusion. The most esteemed personal qualities, such as independence, will to freedom, sympathy, and the sense of justice, are social as well as individual virtues.”<sup>91</sup> Rejecting society necessitates the rejection of the self, because by turning away from the social realm the individual simultaneously scorns aspects of his nature that are essential to his very humanity, and thus his individuality.

Continuing, Horkheimer explicates that “[t]he fully developed individual is not an emancipation from society, but the deliverance of society from atomization, an atomization that may reach its peak in periods of collectivism and mass culture.”<sup>92</sup> By retreating from society, the individual gives away his capacity for active-external autonomy. The individual must be able to exercise control over both his personal experience and the conditions of the community in which he takes part. So, the withdrawal from political affairs does not help the individual become autonomous, but the current political landscape is such that the vote no longer serves as an avenue through which to realize active-external autonomy due to “gamification,” manipulation, and the influx of money into the political realm. But we must not resign ourselves to lives lived either in the absence of society or in the absence of autonomy.

In his book, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, Alex Gourevitch details the history of nineteenth century labor republicans, explicitly focusing on the Knights of Labor, the first major labor organization in the United States. The Knights were organized, in their words, “for the purpose of organizing and directing the power of the industrial masses” and

---

<sup>91</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 96.

<sup>92</sup> See note 91.

under the principle that “everyone should have not just higher wages, shorter hours, or better conditions, but full economic independence.”<sup>93</sup> By economic independence, they mean freedom from want rather than, as the term is commonly used in political discourse today, the ability of elite actors to do whatever they would like to economically. Gourevitch writes that in political discourse today, freedom is conceived as synonymous with “non-interference,” whereas the old and lost republican understanding of freedom saw it as “non-domination.” In the republican tradition, “dependence on another’s will is the defining condition of unfreedom.”<sup>94</sup> If we are to use the republican definition of freedom, any individual who is dependent on another’s will in order to live has to be seen as unfree.

Gourevitch notes that many of the concerns these labor reformers had—such as the “worry that economic dependence on employers can translate into unequal political influence,”<sup>95</sup> can still be found today in our current economic epoch, but workers lack the vocabulary to identify economic dependence as a form of unfreedom. Horkheimer states that “[a]s religious and moral ideologies fade, and political theory is abolished by the march of economic and political events, the ideas of the workers tend to be molded by the business ideology of their leaders.”<sup>96</sup> And what constitutes the business ideology of their leaders?

Liberty, equality, and democracy, instead of being the ends towards which American governance should strive, have now become means towards the perpetuation of an efficient state.

---

<sup>93</sup> Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>94</sup> Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 11.

<sup>95</sup> Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 175.

<sup>96</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 96.

These virtues, like autonomy, exist, but have been reconfigured and for the most part function as a commodity accessible only to the elite class. “Economic liberty” in political discourse today does not imply that every citizen should be independent from want, but rather that employers and billionaires should be able to spend their money as they see fit. “Equality” does not mean that individuals of all classes should enjoy the same quality of existence, but that everyone should have the same opportunity at success. “Democracy” means that everyone has the right to vote for their representatives—but that the only politicians with a fair shot at winning are the ones sponsored by the two main parties.

Gourevitch finds that today, liberty is invoked most frequently in current discourse in order to argue *against* “worker attempts to exercise collective control over their labor” and that economic freedom is understood not in terms of the individual but rather on the part of the elite to obtain “less regulation and lower taxes.”<sup>97</sup> Participation in the wage-labor system undermines an individual’s right to freedom because they are forced into a position of dependency on the will of their employer, but the transcendental approach of withdrawal from society altogether is an impossibility for those under economic systems of domination. Gourevitch writes, “structural domination translates into personal domination, and the latter reproduces the former insofar as very few workers can ever acquire enough capital to start their own business...there is no way, within the existing methods of distributing control over productive resources, for all to escape the need to sell their capacity for labor.”<sup>98</sup> As in Emerson’s Old Fable of Man, labor for the sake of nothing but labor itself, labor that carries no fulfillment for the individual and leaves him

---

<sup>97</sup> Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 175.

<sup>98</sup> Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 178-9.

dependent on another's will, objectifies him and traps him into being meaningful only in terms of his functional production rather than as an end in himself.

Horkheimer writes that "the spontaneity of the working class has been impaired by the general dissolution of individuality",<sup>99</sup> and that even though "man's self-expression has become identical with his function in the prevailing system" he still experiences a "longing" within him; that through this longing is inevitably repressed, it is a sign of his "smoldering resentment."<sup>100</sup> He writes that if this resentment were to ever surface, it "would be turned against the whole social order, which has an intrinsic tendency to prevent its members from gaining insight into the mechanisms of their own repression."<sup>101</sup>

While liberty, equality, and democracy are still important tenets of the American creed, they have been emptied out of their intrinsic virtue and function only in order to maintain the existing hierarchical relations of society. Horkheimer states that workers of the modern era are no less informed about national affairs and political movements than the rest of the population, but that this information does not necessarily translate into distaste for the regime that allows for their lack of autonomy. He states that they "will join in any persecution of a capitalist or politician who has been singled out because he has violated the rules of the game; but they do not question the rules in themselves. They have learned to take social injustice—even inequity within their own group—as a powerful fact, and to take powerful facts as the only things to be respected."<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 101.

<sup>100</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 102.

<sup>101</sup> See note 100.

<sup>102</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 106.

The realization of autonomy in the masses necessitates the growth of the individual, and so it is absolutely imperative that individuals begin to, through the practice of internal autonomy, question the rules in themselves. But tragically, the scientification of everyday existence post-enlightenment has led to the loss of utopic fantasy. In Horkheimer's words, for those dominated by systemic blocks made towards the realization of autonomy, "[t]heir minds are closed to dreams of a basically different world and to concepts that, instead of being mere classification of facts, are oriented toward real fulfillment of those dreams."<sup>103</sup> Is it naive to implore the masses to, once again, dream?

Though the degradation of internal autonomy through coercive conformity of mind and the reconfiguration of foundational virtues of governance in the name of efficiency have had devastating effects for the potential for the active-external autonomy of the masses to be realized, it is in no way impossible for the state of things to change. Emerson notes in "Politics" that the pseudo-scientific quantification of the individual is oftentimes inaccurate, as it neglects to account for the power of man when united by a common idea. He writes that it is impossible to determine the boundaries of personal influence because individuals are "organs of moral or supernatural force." Humans do not follow the same mathematical rules as do other beings, and "[u]nder the the dominion of an idea, which possesses the minds of multitudes...the powers of persons are no longer subjects of calculation. A nation of men unanimously bent on freedom, or conquest, can easily confound the arithmetic of statist, and achieve extravagant actions, out of all proportion to their means."<sup>104</sup> Social integration may be a powerful force against the

---

<sup>103</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 106.

<sup>104</sup> Emerson, "Politics."

realization of autonomy due to its demands of conformity, but a conscious social integration, a social integration of individuals bent on internal autonomy—this, perhaps, could be the way out.

Call me an optimist, but the growing popularity of the concept of the “4HL” does seem to point to a burgeoning awareness of the degrading state of labor today. And awareness may be the first step towards resistance: “The task of the masses today,” Horkheimer writes, “consists not in clinging to traditional party patterns, but rather in recognizing and resisting the monopolistic pattern that is infiltrating their own organizations and infesting their minds individually.”<sup>105</sup>

These words were written in 1947 and Horkheimer most likely could not have predicted how much further this mental infestation would go if he had tried, but his words ring true today.

Continuing to cling to traditional party patterns does not seem to be the answer. Perhaps, though, under the dominion of an idea, one that possesses the minds of multitudes through conscious and introspective acceptance, individuals could begin to see themselves as ends and reject any structures that compel them to think otherwise.

---

<sup>105</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 104.



## CONCLUSION

---

In a world in which I had unlimited time to work on this thesis, I would have liked to propose some detailed solutions to the problem I have outlined in the past 71 pages. But unfortunately this Senior Project has a due date. All things must pass, I suppose. But, if you'll entertain my postulating for just a few pages more, I'd like to end things between us on a high note and briefly run through a few promising proposals that would, in my humble opinion, help to advance the cause of autonomy in the masses.

Perhaps you remember The Knights of Labor, the labor republicans featured in Alex Gourevitch's book, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*. The Knights did not view wage-labor as free labor, and believed that labor based on any dependence on another's will was an extension of slavery. Instead of wage-labor, which they saw as inconsistent with the republican ideals promised at the founding, they proposed cooperation: the shared management and ownership of enterprises by the workers themselves. This, they argued, was "the only way to secure to everyone their social and economic independence."<sup>106</sup> By affording workers shared control of the very enterprises where they work, these workers would no longer be dependent on the will of their employer, and would also have a vested interest in the success of their operation.

Cooperative control would reduce domination, allowing for greater active-external autonomy in the realm of labor. Gourevitch states that the point of cooperative production is not to make new laws to "balance the worker's inescapable dependence, nor to shift the economic

---

<sup>106</sup> Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 6.

relationship from the social inequalities of the labor market to the political equality of democratic law-making. Instead, its aim is to remove as much as possible that dependence at its origin, on the grounds that workers can, in fact, make competent decisions.”<sup>107</sup> That all sounds excellent to me.

Another exciting potential way out could be through Universal Basic Income, a proposal made famous by failed presidential candidate Andrew Yang, but a promising one nonetheless. The premise of a Universal Basic Income is that every adult citizen—yes, every single one,—would receive from the government a set amount of money, regularly. The march of technological progress does not seem to be stopping any time soon and artificial intelligence gets better and better by the day—so how much longer are we as a society going to keep collectively pretending that large sectors of the economy are not going to be automated and large sectors of the workforce will not be made unemployed? David Graeber writes that many proposed policy solutions, like the reduction of the work week or a guaranteed jobs program, sound nice but would just end up generating “more bullshit,” and gets behind Basic Income because it would do the opposite. He states that the fundamental promise of Basic Income would be to “detach livelihood from work. Its immediate effect would be to massively reduce the amount of bureaucracy in any country that implemented it.”<sup>108</sup>

Continuing, Graeber writes, “Basic Income might seem like it is a vast expansion of state power...but, in fact, it’s exactly the reverse. Huge sections of government—and precisely, the most intrusive and obnoxious ones, since they are most deeply involved in the moral surveillance

---

<sup>107</sup> Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 11.

<sup>108</sup> Graeber, *On Bullshit Jobs*, 279.

of ordinary citizens—would be instantly made unnecessary and could be simply closed down.”<sup>109</sup>

Sounds like a transcendentalist solution if I’ve ever heard one: Universal Basic Income would reduce the size and intrusiveness of government whilst simultaneously restoring individual dignity. Each individual, once having received enough money to provide themselves a reasonable standard of living, would have a choice to make: pursue further wealth, or do something else with their time.

In both of these proposals, work would ideally no longer be a force against autonomy. Cooperative control would allow workers to set their own terms of employment, and Basic Income would remove necessity-based dependency. Any individual working would be choosing to do so consciously, with the option to do otherwise—and with the material necessities of existence met, both internal and active-external autonomy could finally be realized. In a world where livelihood was divorced from work, I might spend my days walking and thinking, reading and writing. Spending time with friends and family, and learning from them, and laughing. Willing and acting. And you?

This is by no means an exhaustive list, nor is it meant to be. But the purpose of outlining these two remedies to the problem of society’s encroachment on individual autonomy is to demonstrate that there is a way out. That if all individuals identified the restrictions placed on their minds, and in resistance began to practice internal autonomy, the world would be one step closer to being a better place, one where active-external autonomy could be realized as well. Cooperative control; Universal Basic Income; the overhaul and restructuring of existing

---

<sup>109</sup> Graeber, *On Bullshit Jobs*, 280.

campaign finance laws; the demise of the two-party system; all of these hypothetical solutions could happen—so long as all individuals begin again to think for themselves.

## Bibliography

Know Your Meme. "4 Hour Life / 4HL," February 1, 2023.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/4-hour-life-4hl>.

Harper's Magazine. "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate | Harper's Magazine," July 7,

2020. <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>.

The Objective. "A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate," July 10, 2020.

<https://objectivejournalism.org/2020/07/a-more-specific-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>.

The Objective. "About Us." Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://objectivejournalism.org/about/>.

"Definition of Paradise," April 22, 2023.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradise>.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature and Selected Essays*. Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Politics." *American Transcendentalism Web*. Virginia Commonwealth University, 1844.

<https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/politics.html>.

Gourevitch, Alex. *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*. New York, NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015.

Graeber, David. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 2019.

Han, Byung-Chul. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Futures. London ; New York: Verso, 2017.

- Horkheimer, Max. *Eclipse of Reason*. Bloomsbury Revelations. 1947. Reprint, London ; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 1944. Reprint, New York: Continuum, 2001.
- Iosifidis, Petros, and Nicholas Nicoli. *Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation*. Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2021.
- Kateb, George. *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*. Contestations. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Krause, Sharon R. *Freedom beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism*. Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Lau, Tim. "Citizens United Explained | Brennan Center for Justice." The Brennan Center for Justice, 2019.  
<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained>.
- McIntyre, Lee C. *Post-Truth*. The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018.
- Palmer, Annie. "Amazon Cited by Labor Department for Exposing Warehouse Workers to Safety Hazards." *CNBC*, January 18, 2023.  
<https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/18/amazon-cited-by-osha-for-exposing-warehouse-workers-to-safety-hazards.html>.
- Skallas, Paul. "4 Hour Life Glossary." *Medium*, March 1, 2020.  
<https://medium.com/@pskallas/4-hour-life-glossary-4740bca6412>.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Civil Disobedience," 1849.

<https://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper2/thoreau/civil.html>.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer. Yale Nota Bene. 1854. Reprint, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006.

Weiner, Daniel. "Citizens United Five Years Later | Brennan Center for Justice," 2015.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-five-years-later>.