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## Visions of the future

As a child, I saw Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* at the cinema. I was captivated by so many aspects of it—the moon base, the idea of life from other planets, the self-aware computer HAL, the cryptic scene at the end—and the magnificent technology. In 33 years time we would commute to a space station, in a Pan American passenger craft, and then on to the moon. Well, 2001 has come and gone, Pan American went bankrupt, and we are almost no closer to commuting to the moon now than we were four years after *2001* was released, when NASA finished its Apollo program. Like many movies about the future, some of the predictions have been illuminating but many have been way out.

If there was one area where technology has failed miserably to live up to its promise, it is in that area of transport. The Concorde, a supersonic passenger plane that first flew in 1969, a year after *2001* was released (and one that bore some visual resemblance to the imagined Pan Am Orion III spacecraft in *2001*) has not been bettered in speed; indeed, the Concorde stopped flying altogether in 2003. In 1969, the Boeing 747 'jumbo jet' was also launched, and it looked like planes would get bigger and bigger, not just faster and faster. They did not. The only other 'jumbo-sized' plane to come into production was the Airbus A380 in 2005, and the future of jumbo-sized planes is now in doubt in the face of weak demand, possibly killed off by the economics of air transport (though the need for low-emissions flight might, ironically, lead one day

to a resurgence of larger planes).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, economics has been at least as big a barrier as technology against the translation of grand transport ideas into something experienced by consumers.

On the other hand, the dark, ultimately malevolent onboard computer, HAL, continues to fascinate. We may have been slower than *2001* predicted in getting to artificial intelligence (AI) with HAL's capabilities, but Google, Amazon and Siri are bringing that spaceship's AI capabilities to your home now—and, soon, to your workplace. The favourable economics of digital change make further developments here almost inevitable.

*2001* said a lot about the future—not just technology, but also humanity's relationship with other species. It said very little about future society (aside from the commercialisation of space travel). In this chapter, we want to look at some earlier visions of the future, but we want to focus on what they say about society and what that suggests about work. Many of these visions have been seen in books, movies and songs. From the fiction side, we will focus on three main literary works, all of which have been adapted for the screen. There are many stories written about futures, and we cannot cover them all. All involve predictions of technology and society, varying in their emphasis on each. The ones I have chosen are all relevant to issues of control, class and oppression. They are not all directly about work, but through their views on society we can see things about work.

The first is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, widely considered one of the best novels of the twentieth century, and first published in 1948.<sup>2</sup> The second is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, written over three decades after Orwell's book.<sup>3</sup> Both books were dystopian—they predicted nightmare futures as models that we should do everything to avoid. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was turned into a movie three times, including a film starring John Hurt and Richard Burton, released in 1984 itself, that

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1 Karl Kruszelnicki, 'Road Trip to Future Travel'. *Great Moments in Science*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 29 May 2018, [www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/greatmomentsinscience/lessons-from-first-road-trip/9795122](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/greatmomentsinscience/lessons-from-first-road-trip/9795122). Hydrogen fuel would produce zero carbon emissions, but requires large storage volumes in planes, so some passenger space would need to make way for fuel space. On the demise of the A380 see Jasper Jolly, 'A380: Airbus to Stop Making Superjumbo as Orders Dry Up'. *Guardian*, 14 February 2019, [www.theguardian.com/business/2019/feb/14/a380-airbus-to-end-production-of-superjumbo](http://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/feb/14/a380-airbus-to-end-production-of-superjumbo).

2 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949; repr., 1976).

3 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1986).

was faithful to the book. There were also numerous stage productions. *The Handmaid's Tale* was turned into a widely watched TV series released in 2017, similar but not identical to the book. Three decades after Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, Dave Eggers wrote *The Circle*, a very different book, about a large tech company that could almost be considered utopian by many of its employees.<sup>4</sup> It, too, was made into a movie, released in 2017, which followed closely the first half of the book but diverged widely in the second, such that the ending was almost the opposite of that in the book. While Eggers's book subtly highlighted the sinister side of this utopia, and had a suitably dark ending, the movie ended on a bizarrely positive note that somewhat missed the point. It was not a great box-office success.

Of course, predictions are made not just in fiction but in nonfiction as well, and in a chapter about visions of the future we must also consider these. We will also examine how accurate or otherwise earlier popular predictions of the future, by politicians, writers and futurists, have proved to be, particularly in relation to work. What happened to all those predictions of increased leisure and short working weeks? Have trends on working hours and work intensification continued? What explains recent developments in these areas? What is the future of, and what are the influences on, work–life balance? And what does this tell us about how the choices that affect the future of work will be made? We will start with these, and then move on to more literary futures.

## Futures of work and leisure

If ever there was a need, in studies of work, for the somewhat hard-to-source maxim, 'It's dangerous to make predictions, especially about the future',<sup>5</sup> it is in relation to working time and leisure. John Maynard Keynes was not alone in predicting that increased productivity would see the average working week drop to 15 hours or so.<sup>6</sup> A series of academic or professional predictions issued in the 1960s and 1970s foresaw that

4 Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (New York: Vintage, 2013).

5 Although it has been attributed to people ranging from Neils Bohr to Samuel Goldwyn and even Yogi Berra, it appears to have originated from an unknown Dane, probably a parliamentarian, in the 1840s. Garson O'Toole, 'It's Difficult to Make Predictions, Especially About the Future'. Quote Investigator, 20 October 2013. [quoteinvestigator.com/2013/10/20/no-predict/](http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/10/20/no-predict/).

6 John Maynard Keynes, 'Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren'. In *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1930; repr., 2010).

working time would consistently drop, and a number predicted a working week of between 20 and 30 hours by the year 2000.<sup>7</sup> In the same era, some authors wrote of a forthcoming ‘age of leisure’, though they did not necessarily refer to quantitative forecasts of working hours to do so.<sup>8</sup> Such claims occasionally, but less commonly, resurface in the context of current technological projections.<sup>9</sup>

## Hours of work

Needless to say, the working week did not shorten in the huge way anticipated by some of those predictions. In countries where average total working hours reduced, it arose from the growth of (mostly female-dominated) part-time employment, unrelated to technology effects. Reductions in average hours for *full-time* workers were harder to come by. Australia was one of those countries in the industrialised world that experienced increased working hours for full-time workers at the end of last century.<sup>10</sup> Part of this trend was an increase in the proportion of employees working unpaid overtime. An important feature of Australian work-time practice is the high proportion of employees working extended or long hours. Based on a comparison of nine OECD countries, Jacobs and Gerson found that Australia had the highest proportion of workforce working more than 50 hours per week.<sup>11</sup> A number of countries regulated maximum actual hours of work, but Australia did not. The trend was most marked in the 1990s. By the beginning of the next decade, mild-mannered researchers were pondering ‘with the growing levels of stress and distress that are associated with the changes to labour utilisation that are favoured by employers, we have to wonder whether these trends are

7 Mary A. Holman, ‘A National Time-Budget for the Year 2000’. *Sociology and Social Research* 46, no. 1 (1961); Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Wiener, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Michael Dower, ‘The Fourth Wave: The Challenge of Leisure’. *The Architect’s Journal* (1965): 123–90; J. Fourastié, *Les 40,000 Heures* (Paris: Editions Gonthier, 1965); M. Kaplan, *Leisure: Theory and Policy* (New York: Wiley, 1975). All cited in Anthony James Veal, ‘The Leisure Society I: Myths and Misconceptions, 1960–1979’. *World Leisure Journal* 53, no. 3 (2011): 206–27.

8 Veal, ‘Leisure Society’.

9 Matt Novak, ‘Bullshit Article About Bullshit Automation Promises Bullshit Life of Leisure’. *Gizmodo*, 16 October 2017, [paleofuture.gizmodo.com/bullshit-article-about-bullshit-automation-promises-bul-1819515685](http://paleofuture.gizmodo.com/bullshit-article-about-bullshit-automation-promises-bul-1819515685).

10 Iain Campbell, ‘Extended Working Hours in Australia’. *Labour and Industry* 13, no. 1 (2002): 91–110.

11 Jerry A. Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson, ‘Overworked Individuals or Overworked Families?’. *Work and Occupations* 28, no. 1 (2001): 40–63.

sustainable'.<sup>12</sup> Since then, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on average hours worked by full-time employees have suggested that the trend stabilised or partially reversed over the subsequent decade. The average full-time working week rose from 44.5 hours in February 1979 to 46.5 hours in February 1998 in Australia, but gradually eased to 45.1 hours by February 2014.

Perhaps society approached a 'saturation point' regarding how many hours full-time employees can work in the context of their other responsibilities; perhaps this was also a result of a relative stabilisation, for a while, in union membership (after a long period of decline) and hence power relations in the workplace. Resistance grows, both organised—through unions and industrial action—and unorganised, through absenteeism, quitting, losses in loyalty, problems in quality of output, even possibly sabotage. The employee goodwill or 'organisational citizenship' that firms come to expect and indeed rely upon (often without realising it) may disappear. It's in this context that *employee* demands for greater flexibility in behaviour by employers (flexibility *for* employees) have expanded. Some workers have the labour market power to achieve this; many do not.

One interesting aspect, found in a study of employees in 13 Queensland organisations undertaken in 2002 by the Griffith Work Time Project, was that increasing hours were disproportionately concentrated among employees who were not compensated for them.<sup>13</sup> Thus increased hours were reported by 39 per cent of employees who *never* received overtime rates of pay for working extra hours, but by just 25 per cent of employees who received overtime rates *at least some* of the time. Long hours were also associated with other forms of weak regulation of working hours (absence of time off, absence of rostered days off or 'penalty rates') and management-driven workplace cultures that promoted long hours.<sup>14</sup>

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12 David Peetz, Cameron Allan, and Michael O'Donnell, 'Are Australians Really Unhappier with Their Bosses Because They're Working Harder? Perspiration and Persuasion in Modern Work' (paper presented at Rethinking Institutions for Work and Employment, Selected Papers from the XXXVIII Annual CIRA Conference, Quebec, 26–28 May 2001).

13 Griffith Work Time Project, *Working Time Transformations and Effects* (Brisbane: Queensland Department of Industrial Relations, 2003).

14 *Ibid.*; David Peetz et al., 'Race against Time: Extended Hours in Australia'. *Australian Bulletin of Labour* 29, no. 2 (2003): 126–42.

The pattern of increasing hours was associated with simultaneous overemployment and underemployment. Many full-time workers still want fewer hours, while many part-time workers (especially casuals) want more hours, and many people without work seek employment. The first group (want fewer hours) outnumber the second group (want more hours) in aggregate, in both sexes, and among employees working 40 or more hours per week.<sup>15</sup> Over the years, though, the proportion of all workers wanting more hours has increased as the incidence of part-time work has increased (i.e. an increasing number of people are put into part-time work when what they wanted was full-time work). The ABS now publishes a time series on underemployment but not yet on overemployment.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of having more leisure time, working hours are increasingly interfering in traditional leisure days (Saturdays and Sundays), especially (but by no means exclusively) in the retail and hospitality industries. Public policy has facilitated this development, most recently in Australia with a reduction in ‘penalty rates’ (an addition to minimum hourly pay arising from the fact that an employee is working unsocial hours) for weekend and holiday workers in those two industries, commencing in 2017.<sup>17</sup> On the question of whether Sundays were worse for workers than Saturdays, the authors of a study from the Centre for Work + Life (CWL), using Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) data, concluded: ‘Those who work on Saturday and particularly Sunday have worse work life [sic] interference—an issue that is relevant to the current debate about penalty rates in Australia.’<sup>18</sup> Other Australian studies also showed that Sunday remained a day for family and civic activities, more so than Saturday or any weekday.<sup>19</sup>

15 Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Employment Arrangements and Superannuation’. Canberra, 6361.0.

16 In Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Labour Force, Australia’. Canberra, 6202.0.

17 Fair Work Commission, ‘4 Yearly Review of Modern Awards—Penalty Rates’. ([2017] FWCFB 1001, 2017), 23 February.

18 Natalie Skinner and Barbara Pocock, *The Persistent Challenge: Living, Working and Caring in Australia in 2014*. The Australian Work and Life Index 2014 (Adelaide: Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia, September 2014), 1.

19 Lyn Craig and Judith E. Brown, ‘Weekend Work and Leisure Time with Family and Friends: Who Misses Out?’. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76, no. 4 (2014): 710–27; Michael Bittman, ‘Sunday Working and Family Time’. *Labour and Industry* 16, no. 1 (2005): 59–81; David Peetz, Scott Bruynius, and Georgina Murray, ‘Choice and the Impact of Changes to Sunday Premiums in the Australian Retail and Hospitality Industries’. *Journal of Industrial Relations* (2019), doi.org/10.1177/0022185618814578.

In some industries, particularly mining, there has been a move away from eight-hour work days back to standardised, rotating 12-hour shifts with a resultant working week of well over 38 hours.<sup>20</sup> Unused machines ‘represent during the time they lie fallow, a useless advance of capital’ and so using labour ‘during all the 24 hours of the day’ is, therefore, an ‘inherent tendency of capitalist production’.<sup>21</sup> In countries with penalty rates and overtime to be taken into account, rotating 12-hour shifts pay well. However, a qualitative study showed they were associated with fatigue; irregular sleep; interruptions to family life; an increasing burden put on the (mainly female) non-shift working partner, especially where there are children in a family; increased stress on family relationships; pressure on community and sporting life in mining towns; and the growth of contractor-based fly-in fly-out ‘long distance commute’ workforces.<sup>22</sup> A study of over 2,000 mine and energy workers (mostly coal miners) found that half were working more hours than they would prefer, even after taking into account how that would affect their income and other activities, while 39 per cent were working the number of hours they would prefer and just 11 per cent were working fewer hours than they wanted.<sup>23</sup> The Griffith Work Time Project also illustrated both the role of tighter control and how employees internalised pressure on working hours. Among employees who reported no change in their say over how many hours they worked, only 23 per cent reported increased hours. But increased hours were reported by 51 per cent of those who said that their say in how many hours they worked had gone *down*—and by 58 per cent of those who reported that their say over how many hours they worked had gone *up*!<sup>24</sup>

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20 Kathryn Heiler and Richard Rickersgill, ‘Shiftwork and Rostering Arrangements in the Australian Mining Industry: An Overview of Key Trends’. *Australian Bulletin of Labour* 27 (2001): 20–42.

21 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (London: The Electric Book Company, 1887; repr., 1998), 369.

22 Georgina Murray and David Peetz, *Women of the Coal Rushes* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010).

23 David Peetz, Georgina Murray, and Olav Muurlink, *Work and Hours Amongst Mining and Energy Workers* (Brisbane: Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University, 2012).

24 Griffith Work Time Project, *Working Time*, 24.

Thus there were, in effect, two paths to increased hours: one involving tighter direct control over employees' hours, and one involving a loosening of direct control and replacing it with internalisation of the need to work longer hours to 'get the job done'.<sup>25</sup> Employees internalised pressure to work long hours, often for reasons associated with 'long hours' organisational cultures, and the hegemonic power of ideas associated with 'working hard to get ahead' (or even to retain one's job!) so employees with higher say in their working hours paradoxically tended to work more, not fewer, hours. This is consistent with evidence from an earlier survey, which showed that work intensification could be achieved either by tightening managerial prerogative *or* by increasing employee control,<sup>26</sup> and with a qualitative study by Barker of work intensity in 'concertive' firms.<sup>27</sup> That is, the two paths to work intensification involve either stricter managerial direct control or less direct managerial control in order to achieve greater indirect managerial control.

## Work intensity and work–life interference

Evidence for work intensification has indeed been found in many studies in multiple countries over several decades.<sup>28</sup> Work intensification can be a way that firms can adjust their labour inputs.<sup>29</sup> It may accompany greater functional flexibility<sup>30</sup> or numerical flexibility<sup>31</sup>—indeed, these forms of flexibility (both discussed in Chapter 6) may cause work intensification. It can be achieved through such simple mechanisms as speed-up of the production line, an increase in the target number of 'swipes' expected

25 Ibid.; Peetz et al., 'Race against Time'.

26 Peetz, Allan, and O'Donnell, 'Are Australians Really Unhappier'.

27 James R. Barker, 'Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive Control in Self-Managing Teams'. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1993): 408–37.

28 Francis Green, 'Why Has Work Effort Become More Intense?'. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society* 43, no. 4 (2004): 709–41; Brigid van Wanrooy et al., *Australia at Work: In a Changing World* (Sydney: Workplace Research Centre, University of Sydney, November 2009).

29 Cameron Allan, Michael O'Donnell, and David Peetz, 'More Tasks, Less Secure, Working Harder: Three Dimensions of Labour Utilisation'. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 41, no. 4 (1999): 519–35.

30 Anna Pollert, ed. *Farewell to Flexibility* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Michael O'Donnell, 'Empowerment or Enslavement? Lean Production, Immigrant Women and Service Work in Public Hospitals'. *Labour and Industry* 6, no. 3 (1995): 73–94.

31 Gareth Rees and Sarah Fielder, 'The Services Economy, Subcontracting and the New Employment Relations: Contract Catering and Cleaning'. *Work, Employment and Society* 6, no. 3 (1992): 73–94.

from a checkout operator,<sup>32</sup> ‘downsizing’ of an existing workforce<sup>33</sup> or computer-based monitoring of employees.<sup>34</sup> Increasingly, digitalisation is seen as driving work intensification.<sup>35</sup>

Working hours and work intensification have implications for what Skinner and Pocock call ‘work–life interference’—inviting us to turn the well-rehearsed concept of work–life balance on its head.<sup>36</sup> Barbara Pocock is one of the leading writers on work–life issues and for some time headed the Centre for Work + Life (CWL) at the University of South Australia.<sup>37</sup> With Natalie Skinner she examined, in Australia, the Fair Work Act’s ‘right to request’ (RTR) that was introduced in January 2010. This enabled certain employees to request changed working arrangements (to help them care for their child). These arrangements could include different start and/or finish times, shorter hours and a changed location of work. But it was merely a ‘right to request’, not a ‘right to have’. Employers were able to refuse requests on undefined ‘reasonable business grounds’. There was no appeal from the employer’s decision. The right in itself was a step forward in promoting employee-centred flexibility and work–life balance, and echoed legislation in various European countries, especially the Nordic countries.

The Australian legislation, however, was ‘generally weaker’ than that in other countries,<sup>38</sup> restricting eligibility to a small group, and making it easy for employers to refuse a request. Employers appeared to reject

32 Ern Reeder, ‘The Fast Food Industry’. In *Technology and the Labour Process*, ed. Evan Willis (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 150–1.

33 Wayne F. Cascio, ‘Downsizing: What Do We Know? What Have We Learned?’. *Academy of Management Executive* 7, no. 1 (1993): 95–104.

34 Christopher Wright and John Lund, ‘Best Practice Taylorism: “Yankee Speed-up” in Australian Grocery Distribution’. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 38, no. 2 (1996): 196–212.

35 See Michael Bittman, Judith E. Brown, and Judy Wajcman, ‘The Mobile Phone, Perpetual Contact and Time Pressure’. *Work Employment and Society* 23, no. 4 (2009): 673–91; and Judy Wajcman, ‘Life in the Fast Lane? Towards a Sociology of Technology and Time’. *British Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2008): 59–77, which discuss the ethics of this trend, and some of the theoretical issues of the time/technology/work intensification nexus.

36 Natalie Skinner and Barbara Pocock, ‘Flexibility and Work–Life Interference in Australia’. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 53, no. 1 (2011): 65–82.

37 Barbara Pocock, *The Work–Life Collision* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2003); Barbara Pocock, *The Labour Market Ate My Babies* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2006); Barbara Pocock, Sara Charlesworth, and Janine Chapman, ‘Work–Family and Work–Life Pressures in Australia: Advancing Gender Equality in “Good Times”?’ *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 33, no. 9/10 (2013): 594–612; Barbara Pocock and Natalie Skinner, *The Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI)* (Adelaide: Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia, 2009).

38 Sara Charlesworth and Iain Campbell, ‘Right to Request Regulation: Two New Australian Models’. *Australian Journal of Labour Law* 21, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

applications for flexible work by men more often than by women, which might seem good for women at first glance but it reinforces traditional notions of the domestic division of labour and traditional notions of who should be demonstrating the flexibility.<sup>39</sup> More broadly, institutional arrangements and employing organisations make it difficult, especially for women, to make transitions between work and care,<sup>40</sup> and most organisations make a cost–benefit analysis of the value to the employer of providing family-friendly working conditions.<sup>41</sup>

Overall, the promise of increased leisure in the face of new technology has not been realised. One factor behind that failure was simply that productivity growth did not proceed as expected. Globally and in Australia, productivity growth has slowed since the introduction of market liberal reforms in most countries in the 1980s and beyond. But the bigger factor has been that social forces have panned out differently to what those making the projections appeared to anticipate. Workers have not had the collective power to ensure that higher productivity is translated into greater leisure. Indeed, worker organisation has declined. Moreover, regulation has tended to soften, again reducing the need for higher productivity to be translated into fewer working hours. Management has not sought to reduce the number of hours worked by full-time employees, instead finding advantage in increasing them (it saves on recruitment costs), while flexibly deploying casual, part-time labour. An increased supply of part-time labour (particularly from women with children (re-)entering the workforce) has made this easier for employers to do.

This tells us that accurately anticipating social forces and social trends will be at least as important in envisaging the future of work as will be accurately anticipating the broad types of technology to be introduced or their productivity effects. So, as we move to that part of this chapter that is based on literary sources, our focus is not really on those works that make

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39 Natalie Skinner, Claire Hutchinson, and Barbara Pocock, *The Big Squeeze: Australian Work and Life Index 2012* (Adelaide: Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia, 2012), 37; Glenda Strachan et al., *Work and Careers in Australian Universities: Report on Employee Survey* (Brisbane: Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University, October 2012), 27, [www.griffith.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/88125/Work-and-Career-Report-on-Employee-Survey\\_Final-v2.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/88125/Work-and-Career-Report-on-Employee-Survey_Final-v2.pdf); Georgina Murray, David Peetz, and Olav Muurlink, *Women and Work in Australian Mining* (Brisbane: Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University, 2012), 5.

40 Barbara Pocock, 'Work/Care Regimes: Institutions, Culture and Behaviour and the Australian Case'. *Gender, Work & Organization* 12, no. 1 (2005): 32–49.

41 Belinda H. Reeve et al., 'Regulation, Managerial Discretion and Family-Friendliness in Australia's Changing Industrial Relations Environment'. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 54, no. 1 (2012): 57–74.

predictions or comments about technology and productivity. Instead, we want to focus on those that comment on social forces—and these need not even be explicitly about work.

## Lessons from literature

Turning to fictional literature is something we do not do just for the fun of it. It is not merely about the rights and wrongs of imaginaries. It allows us to speculate on possible outcomes from our current conditions through several mechanisms. We can see contemporary commentaries on social, economic and other realities, placed in a futuristic context. We see scrutiny and satire about the human condition. We see ideas about our ongoing social struggles to maintain individual integrity and kindness in work in the face of economic struggles for power and control. We are invited to free our creative thinking to look at alternative futures. We might hear a message of alarm about the dangers at work. ‘Predictions’ from literature might be warnings of what is to be avoided, rather than expectations of what is to come.

There is also a healthy precedent for this approach. One of the most interesting reads on management is David Knights and Hugh Willmott’s *Management Lives*,<sup>42</sup> which takes as its foundation four very different novels that illustrate the role of identity, insecurity, power and inequality in the management experience. The novels: are David Lodge’s *Nice Work*; Kazuo Ishiguru’s *The Remains of the Day*; Tom Woolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*; and Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Like those we focus on here, all were subsequently transformed into movies or TV series. Knights and Willmott chose this approach because novels illustrated the issues they wanted to focus on, and are valued by readers because of the relevance they have to their own lives, potentially demonstrating the connection between theoretical concepts and personal experience.<sup>43</sup> None of the four were centrally about ‘management’, though Lodge’s *Nice Work* probably came closest, while Ishiguru’s *The Remains of*

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42 David Knights and Hugh Willmott, *Management Lives: Power and Identity in Work Organizations* (London: Sage, 1999).

43 Alessia Contu and Hugh Willmott, ‘The Docudrama: A Situated Learning Experience’. In *Innovations in Teaching Business and Management*, ed. Christine Hockings and Ian Moore (Birmingham: SEDA Publications, Staff Educational and Development Association, 2001), 95–109.

*the Day* and Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are on seemingly unrelated topics, but used to illustrate the issues of identity and insecurity that were relevant to understanding management.

But first a spoiler alert: if you do not want to find out what happens in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Circle* here, put this down and first read those books instead.

## Nineteen Eighty-Four

One classic futuristic scenario is that found in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Written in 1948, the book tells the story of Winston Smith, a minor functionary in the totalitarian one-party state that is Oceania, one of only three countries in the world. The first part of the book concerns Smith's daily life in the Party and the state (he rewrites old news stories to make them consistent with the Party line), his writing a diary (which is itself 'thoughtcrime'), and meeting and having an affair with a woman from the Party, culminating in their capture. The second part describes his internment and torture by the 'Ministry of Love' until he finally relents and comes to love 'Big Brother', the head (if he exists) of the Party and state.

You have probably heard from time to time the adjective 'Orwellian' applied to something, usually undesirable—such as excessive surveillance or monitoring of people, or attempts by governments or corporations to exercise control over people's thinking. That adjective is used because Orwell described (very critically) his futuristic vision of what surveillance and control may come to look like. The activities of the National Security Agency (NSA), for example, are often described as 'Orwellian'. I am not sure that he would really appreciate his name being used that way, but that is the way that language has evolved. Some people would describe the use of cameras in every imaginable location in the house in the TV franchise *Big Brother* as being 'Orwellian' and they would be correct—the title for the franchise coming directly from the chief autocrat in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I doubt that Orwell would have approved of the *Big Brother* series.<sup>44</sup>

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44 There was another British TV show, from 1970, also called *Big Brother*. This mini-series of six one-off plays, created by Wilfred Greatorex, drew a number of scenarios that were intentionally dystopian. IMDb, 'Big Brother'. Movies, TV & Showtimes. [www.imdb.com/title/tt1236228/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1236228/).

Although the book was not written explicitly about work—Orwell was warning against the dangers of totalitarian tendencies in society as a whole—in 1993 British academic Hugh Willmott wrote a seminal article that compared modern corporate culturism to the techniques used by the ruling party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>45</sup> To understand this argument, we first need some context about what culture is. We can think of it as ‘a way of seeing things that is common to many people’<sup>46</sup> or, more precisely, ‘the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about and reacts to its various environments’.<sup>47</sup> These definitions—from organisational studies—highlight that culture involves ideas and assumptions that influence how we see situations, think about them and react to them. The three main elements of any culture are: the basic assumptions that it embodies (about what *is*), the values (regarding what *ought* to be), and the culture’s artefacts and creations (such as stories, myths, rituals, ceremonies, symbols, language and behavioural norms).<sup>48</sup> Despite what some managers say (and, at times, want), most organisations are not ‘monocultural’. In other words, there is not just one culture at the workplace. There are various subcultures within organisations. Schein, for example, argued for three subcultures: ‘operators’, ‘engineers’ and ‘executives’.<sup>49</sup> It may be an overgeneralisation but it is fair comment in as much as it draws attention to diversity of culture within organisations.

So culturism is the attempt by management to create specific organisational cultures reflecting management’s objectives. When we discuss ‘culturism’, we are talking about attempts by management to shape employee beliefs. In recent decades senior managers have often consciously attempted to create a particular type of culture at the workplace. Some scholars are highly critical of management attempts to introduce cultural change. For instance, Mabey and Salaman argued that ‘the focus on “cultural change” ... is often an attempt to impose a consensual, unitarist conception of the organisation on all employees, and thus to gain their commitment’.<sup>50</sup>

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45 Hugh Willmott, ‘Strength Is Ignorance; Slavery Is Freedom: Managing Culture in Modern Organizations’, *The Journal of Management Studies* 30, no. 4 (1993): 515–52.

46 Diana C. Phesey, *Organisational Cultures: Types and Transformations* (London: Routledge, 1993).

47 Edgar H. Schein, ‘Culture: The Missing Concept in Organization Studies’, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1996): 229–40; 236.

48 Edgar H. Schein, *Organisational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986).

49 Schein, ‘Culture: The Missing Concept in Organization Studies’, 236.

50 Christopher Mabey and Graeme Salaman, *Strategic Human Resource Management* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 290.

Jaynes studied the New Zealand division of a multinational bank. He found that the deliberate creation of a sales culture reflected ‘a strong unitarist approach in which the goals of management and employees are viewed as shared. This disguised management’s vested power structure in a veil of neutrality and cohesion’.<sup>51</sup> The changes brought about were ‘largely effective in achieving the desired transition of the workplace culture toward a sales and customer focus’. Employees were seen to ‘internalise the culture change, unaware of their objectification and subjugation by management’.<sup>52</sup> Culture was thus a form of employee control.

The central element of Willmott’s article was the comparisons he drew between the practices of culturism and the notions of ‘newspeak’ and ‘doublethink’ expounded in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Hence the main title of his article was ‘Strength is Ignorance; Slavery is Freedom’, inverting two of the three slogans of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s Ministry of Truth (responsible for propaganda). He argued:

In the ideal-typical bureaucratic, rule-governed organisation, employees are at least permitted to think what they like so long as they *act* in a technically competent manner ... in organisations with a strong corporate culture, such ‘disloyal’ communication is at best strictly coded if it is not entirely tabooed.

He then quoted early management gurus Peters and Waterman: ‘you either buy into their norms or you get out’.<sup>53</sup> According to Willmott, the ‘guiding aim and abiding concern of corporate culturism is to win the “hearts and minds” of employees, to define their purpose by managing what they think and feel, and not just how they behave’.<sup>54</sup> In this way, Willmott considered culturism was a ‘totalising’ management attempt to design the normative framework of work.<sup>55</sup> Management seeks to develop and sustain this culture by careful recruitment and promotion of employees who accept the core values of the organisation.<sup>56</sup>

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51 Stephen Jaynes, ‘The Control of Workplace Culture: A Critical Perspective’. Paper presented at Current Research in Industrial Relations conference, Brisbane, 1997, 182–9.

52 Ibid., 188–9.

53 Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), quoted in Willmott, ‘Strength Is Ignorance’, 528.

54 Willmott, ‘Strength Is Ignorance’, 516.

55 Ibid., 524.

56 Ibid., 534.

Willmott made repeated allusions to the world of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'Like the party member in Oceania, the well-socialised ... corporate employee "is expected to have no private emotions and no respites from enthusiasm ... the speculations which might possibly induce a sceptical or rebellious attitude are killed in advance by his ... inner discipline"'.<sup>57</sup> He drew parallels between practices of culturism and several concepts in Orwell's book. One was the relevance of *newspeak*, the official language of Oceania, designed to help shape thought in particular ways. We see the relevance of newspeak in how some corporations seek to exclude particular messages from entering employee consciousness. In Walmart, if 'associates' (their newspeak term for employees) are 'using union terms such as arbitration, grievance and seniority', managers are under instruction to ring the 'Union Hotline'.<sup>58</sup>

Language is therefore important in all this. Euphemisms like 'associate', 'member' and 'partner' in place of 'employee' help ensure, as Syme (the newspeak documenter in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) would say, that 'the range of consciousness [becomes] always a little smaller'.<sup>59</sup> Syme observed, 'it's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words', and later Orwell remarked that the Party aimed to 'diminish the range of thought ... by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum'.<sup>60</sup> The use of the term 'associates' by Walmart, 'Servo' (a pseudonym for another corporation)<sup>61</sup> and several other corporations (or, in the case of the term 'partners', Starbucks)<sup>62</sup> for what are, at law, employees is intended to shape thinking and expectations towards a framework with its own internal logic—away from one in which workers might seek to obtain the rights that come with being an employee and join a collective organisation for employees.

Another relevant concept is that of *doublethink*—the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.<sup>63</sup> According to Willmott, 'culturism endeavours to secure control by managing the impression of respecting the distinctiveness and individuality of each employee ... enabl[ing] an idea—such as autonomy—

57 Ibid., 541, citing Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 220.

58 Wal-Mart Stores Inc., 'A Manager's Toolbox to Remaining Union Free' (unpublished company document, 1997).

59 Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 45.

60 Ibid., 242.

61 Diane Van den Broek, 'Human Resource Management, Workforce Control and Union Avoidance: An Australian Case Study'. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 39, no. 3 (1997): 332–48.

62 David Emerson, 'Starbucks Axes 61 Stores and 685 Jobs'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July 2008.

63 As discussed in Chapter 11, this is very close to the concept of cognitive dissonance.

to be repudiated while simultaneously laying claim to its reality'.<sup>64</sup> This phenomenon is manifested in many organisations that proclaim how they treat all employees 'as individuals' while simultaneously insisting they 'fit' with the culture of the organisation and pursue its collective, corporate wellbeing.<sup>65</sup> (You may have also encountered the concept 'doublespeak' and wondered if it came from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Although it combines those two previous concepts, it was actually coined some time later by William Lutz to refer to 'language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't ... that makes the bad seem good ... that avoids or shifts responsibility ... that conceals or prevents thought'.)<sup>66</sup>

Willmott also refers to *crimestop*—'the faculty of stopping short as though by instinct at the threshold of any heretical thought'.<sup>67</sup> He separately adds that 'the sense of certainty associated with the cultural "uniformity" required by Big Brother can be highly appealing ... [as providing] freedom from insecurity ... Managers, no less than their subordinates, may welcome the absence or removal of ideas, people and situations that challenge or disrupt the immersion of self in corporate identity'.<sup>68</sup>

So, how well has *Nineteen Eighty-Four* predicted our future, or indeed the future of work? Such books are meant as warnings, not predictions, and their 'failure' to come true might reflect the success of the author's warnings. As it is, the real world in the year 1984 did not match, in detail, the world depicted in the book of that title, and neither does the world of today. That said, the emergence of electronic surveillance, including by state bodies such as the NSA and various state and private organisations in China,<sup>69</sup> has turned out to be at least as effective, perhaps more so, than that portrayed in Orwell's book. As to the workplace, the pervasiveness and violence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Ministry of Love cannot be compared with the control exercised in decollectivising firms. The relevance is

64 Willmott, 'Strength Is Ignorance', 526.

65 David Peetz, *Brave New Workplace: How Individual Contracts Are Changing Our Jobs* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006).

66 William Lutz, 'The World of Doublespeak'. *USA Today* 119, no. 2544 (1990): 34–36, which reproduced part of William Lutz, *Doublespeak*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

67 Willmott, 'Strength Is Ignorance', 526.

68 *Ibid.*, 536.

69 Matthew Carney, 'Leave No Dark Corner'. *ABC News*, 18 September 2018, [www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-18/china-social-credit-a-model-citizen-in-a-digital-dictatorship/10200278](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-18/china-social-credit-a-model-citizen-in-a-digital-dictatorship/10200278). These trials are leading to a national system of 'social credit' rating by 2020. René Raphael and Ling Xi, 'Discipline and Punish: The Birth of China's Social-Credit System', *Nation*, 23 January 2019, [www.thenation.com/article/china-social-credit-system](http://www.thenation.com/article/china-social-credit-system).

more in that, as Willmott points out, modern culturism focuses not so much on what employees do (the focus of rule-governed bureaucratic organisations) as on what employees think. One of the biggest constraints is that ‘unlike the fictional world of Oceania, corporate employees are exposed to, and constituted by, other relations and discourses<sup>70</sup> as they have a life outside the organisation. So we should examine closely the directions that corporate control of people’s *lives* is taking. For that, we will look at Dave Eggers’s book, *The Circle*, but before that we turn to a more gendered dystopia in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

## The Handmaid’s Tale

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* tells the story of a woman, Offred, in a dystopian society (formerly the USA, but now known as Gilead following a violent takeover by a group of armed fundamentalist males). It had been brought to crisis by a plummeting birth rate and disappearing fertility due, presumably, to an environmental crisis. Offred, being fertile, is part of a subjugated class of women (‘handmaids’) that are ritually violated for the purpose of making them pregnant, in order to deliver a baby for a high-status male. These males have infertile ‘wives’ who have higher status than the handmaids but must participate as effective bystanders in the ‘ceremonies’ in which their husbands attempt to impregnate the handmaids. The handmaids are depersonalised, their names simply reflecting which male owns them at a particular time (hence Offred is ‘of Fred’). They wear uniforms very reminiscent of a nun’s habit, but red and white. Their sole purpose is to have babies. Those women who are neither wives nor handmaids (nor performing some other essential role, such as the ‘Aunts’ who control the handmaids, much like matrons in a boarding school) are declared to be ‘unwomen’ and banished to work and possibly starve to death in toxic and fatal distant lands (the Colonies).<sup>71</sup>

Written in the first person, the story shifts back and forth between the present travails and the previous life of Offred (we are not told her real name) with her husband, presumed murdered while they attempted to

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70 Willmott, ‘Strength Is Ignorance’, 535.

71 Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*, 20.

escape to Canada, and her child, long since taken from her. The story ends inconclusively, with Offred about to enter a space in which she either would escape or be captured, tortured and killed.<sup>72</sup>

After the end of the first-person story, however, Atwood adds an epilogue, set in an academic convention decades later, during which it is apparent that Gilead had fallen and some semblance of sense has returned. In that respect, *The Handmaid's Tale* can be considered to be a more optimistic book than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as there is some end to the misery, though even then we do not find out what happened to Offred. (This epilogue is not part of the TV series, which had to find a different means to bring about a form of ambivalent optimism.)

There are many similarities to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Power is maintained through the combined use of ideological force and violence. There are hangings of dissidents at 'the Wall',<sup>73</sup> just as traitors are hanged in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, though in Gilead many hangings occur as a result of violations of fundamentalist norms about women's roles (particularly by abortionists) that may have occurred even before Gilead was created: 'it's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive'.<sup>74</sup> However, Atwood also emphasised the use of rewards and divisions among the subordinated in the techniques used by the powerful to maintain power. For example, every so often there is a 'participation ceremony', in which handmaids are allowed (or required) to execute, usually by stoning, a male found to have broken a law that would also evoke the emotions of the handmaids. It is reminiscent of the 'two minutes hate' at the beginning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but more focused on generating release of frustration and vicarious revenge for the participants, and so more hands-on. Conformity to the system is encouraged by little rewards that are given to the most compliant of the handmaids. Clever exploitation of divisions and a lack of solidarity between oppressed groups enable Gilead's ruling elite to win. Those divisions persist (e.g. between the handmaids and the Aunts) and help perpetuate the system.

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72 A second series of the TV version takes off from here. Its storyline goes beyond that in the book, but Atwood was heavily consulted in this and its production. In this second series we find out Offred's real name, the fate of her husband, and her story after the last scene in the book.

73 Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, 42.

74 *Ibid.*, 43.

As in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there is a network of spies and informers, in Gilead called ‘Eyes’. Offred cannot be sure who is an Eye, and even at the end we are left wondering whether her lover, Nick, is an Eye who will arrest and torture her, or a dissident who will enable her to escape. In both books, continuing war is a theme. Oceania is constantly at war with one of the other two countries, Eastasia or Eurasia, and always in alliance with the other. The fight against the enemy is a rallying cry for patriotic servitude to the state and party. There is also the constant battle against the internal enemy, Goldstein, whose existence is dubious. In Gilead ‘the war is going well’,<sup>75</sup> but it appears to be mainly an internal war against insurgents and heretics, though it features heavily on the news.

Also similar to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the role of ideology and conformity. Much of what Willmott wrote about work and cultural control could be applied to *The Handmaid’s Tale* as well as to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The culture in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is strongly shaped by support for the ruling party, and for the wars being prosecuted against external and internal enemies. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* that ideology is dominated by support for the ideals—that women exist to procreate (the handmaids) or to enhance the status of men (the wives and occasional babies), that women must adhere to very strict rules concerning who they talk to, what they talk about and do in public, and so on. Support for these ideas forms the basis of support for the system in Gilead. In some ways it might be seen as more viable than the dominant ideology in Oceania, but the suffering and humiliation of the handmaids makes the contradiction between ideology and practice very apparent, not least because many of the handmaids had a memory of what life was like before the overthrow of the US government, when they had jobs, among other things. A potential resistance network, though shadowy and obscure to Offred, is given more prominence in Atwood’s world than in Orwell’s. If Willmott were to write about Atwood’s book, the contradiction between ideology and lived experience in Gilead, though more extreme than that faced by modern corporate workers, could better encapsulate the role of culture than analogy with Orwell’s. In Gilead, workers are indeed ‘exposed to, and constituted by, other relations and discourses’,<sup>76</sup> as they had a life not outside but *before* the existing regime—and they are more exposed to alternatives by such mechanisms as visiting tourists or rumours of

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75 Ibid., 29.

76 Willmott, ‘Strength Is Ignorance’, 535.

life in Canada. This is a better analogy with corporate culturism than provided by *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (though, again, the violence in Gilead has nothing comparable in modern culturism).

Unlike *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale* has an obviously strong orientation towards gender—though it also looks at its interactions with class. In some ways, *The Handmaid's Tale* could be seen as a feminist version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. That, however, would downplay its separate significance. Certainly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* paid no regard to gender issues, while *The Handmaid's Tale* placed them front and centre.

What is particularly striking about the storyline is the portrayed reversal of gains that had been made by women through the twentieth century (when the book was written). Atwood contrasts the victories many women had in the 1960s and 1970s with their fate in Gilead. The point is really to demonstrate that the successes achieved by women in the move closer towards equality are fragile, and could be undone as long as women remain excluded from centres of power. The lessons for work are not just about women. They suggest that any apparent gains that do not result in a major shift in power are also susceptible to reversal. Thus while many managers encourage participation by employees in decision-making (discussed in Chapters 2 and 7), this remains in place entirely at the whim of management, and can be easily taken away.

Atwood's book probably also has a more nuanced view of class than Orwell's. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the 'proles', as they are described, are barely discussed. Winston Smith ruminates that they are the only hope for the future, but gives no hint as to how or why any change might come from them. It seems the only glimmer of light in Oceania as, for the inner and outer circles of Party officials (Smith is part of the outer circle), Party control is complete. So it is also a bit of a puzzle as to why the Party gives so little focus to the proles (or why Orwell does likewise). Atwood goes into considerable detail as to the roles of different classes. While women of all classes are clearly oppressed by the theocracy that rules, the majority of men are also oppressed by the social order, and are subject to the same potentially violent control and punishment as the women are.

## The Circle

Dave Egger's *The Circle* is probably the most important book written about a (fictional) workplace since the turn of the century. Set in the near future, it tells the story of Mae, a young woman working at a large 'tech' company, called The Circle, that occupies the market space presently occupied by Google and Facebook. She has the appearance of being in the dream job—in 'the hottest company on the planet'<sup>77</sup>—but, as the reader, we know it is not as it seems. Part of the brilliance of Eggers is not to write the book, as so easily could have been done, as a story of Mae's gradual growing horror at the reality of her situation and the evil managers she encounters in her bid to escape. Rather, he depicts Mae as someone who, while initially disturbed by some of the things she encounters, gradually embraces the corporation and everything it stands for. Indeed, she is eventually repulsed by the warnings of corporate excesses proffered by one of the firm's three founders, and finally betrays him. Along the way she also alienates herself from her parents and inadvertently causes the death of her ex-husband, though she blames that, in effect, on his antisocial rejection of all the good that The Circle offers.

*The Circle* has several important themes. One is monopolisation. The corporation is depicted as having 90 per cent of the search market, 88 per cent of email and 92 per cent of text servicing.<sup>78</sup> It grows ever stronger. A second theme is performance management. As soon as Mae starts her job in Customer Engagement, she is measured by the ratings customers give her, remarkably high benchmarks are set and expected of her, and she obsesses about achieving them. Later, she is told of the need to achieve a high 'conversion' rate (how many people buy products she mentions) and 'retail raw' (the value of consumer purchases of products she mentions).<sup>79</sup> Eventually, Mae offers the view that 'humans can measure all things'.<sup>80</sup> She comes to dislike life off-campus, with its homeless people, unnecessary problems that were correctable through 'simple enough algorithms', and the attendant 'chaos of an orderless world'.<sup>81</sup>

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77 Eggers, *The Circle*, 73.

78 *Ibid.*, 174.

79 *Ibid.*, 249–52.

80 *Ibid.*, 338.

81 *Ibid.*, 373.

We also see the role of cultural control, especially through social activities. Mae is counselled early for not participating enough in social activities sponsored by the corporation, and the HR managers ask if it is because she does not like working there, or suggest she is being selfish. An algorithm generates an indicator of social participation, the PartiRank, which is taken seriously and Mae spends late nights trying to improve her PartiRank. It measures attendance at the parties, brunches or other events organised by The Circle or ‘Circlers’ (employees), but also interactions via social media. Two pages of Eggers’s book detail the many performance indicators Mae tries to influence in order to improve her PartiRank.<sup>82</sup> Social media engagement helps drive monetisation of the Circlers’ work, and is one of the main sources of work intensification, judging by how many screens it adds to Mae’s desk.<sup>83</sup> *The Circle* makes no mention of Orwell’s ‘doublethink’, but it is in effect what Mae practises when she objects to invasions of her privacy—especially over sexual matters<sup>84</sup>—arising from the policies of The Circle (‘we don’t delete here’),<sup>85</sup> yet she increasingly endorses the objectives of the corporation.

Another theme is the contradiction in the rhetoric of ‘transparency’ and its use in ensuring surveillance. Each new technology and process of the corporation leads to greater surveillance, either of employees or of citizens more generally. Participants are pressured to participate in the interests of transparency: ‘If you aren’t transparent, what are you hiding?’<sup>86</sup> In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the ruling party had three paradoxical slogans, depicted thus:

WAR IS PEACE  
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY  
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

In *The Circle*, Eggers presents three slogans that arise from an onstage interview Mae performs, in the same format as Orwell’s, and, in the storyline, projected onto a screen on stage. They draw on Mae’s own words:

SECRETS ARE LIES  
SHARING IS CARING  
PRIVACY IS THEFT<sup>87</sup>

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82 Ibid., 194–5.

83 Ibid., 96, 252.

84 Ibid., 204–6.

85 Ibid., 206.

86 Ibid., 241.

87 Ibid., 305.

They are not all paradoxes in the same way as Orwell's, but rather plausible in the context, even if objectively false. They are also explicitly focused on issues of 'transparency'. The rhetoric of transparency becomes the basis for a totalitarian, corporate-controlled workplace and society.

Indeed, each transgression of personal liberty through heightened surveillance is brought about by a technology that plans to improve the lives of people: protecting children from deviants, protecting adults from crime, advancing human rights or democracy, enhancing the lives of disabled people, or even making it easier to decide which beach to go to. The mechanisms in place or proposed include cameras located almost ubiquitously, in locations or even on people; chips implanted under the skin, even in bones; sensors in communities to detect and locate 'strangers' in houses; even sensors in houses to detect sudden, 'violent' movements.

The book ends with Mae wondering what her friend, Annie, hospitalised and in a coma, is thinking—and considering it an affront and a deprivation that neither she nor anyone else could know. 'The world deserved nothing less' than to know her thoughts 'and would not wait'.<sup>88</sup>

Another idea is the importance of information. On the one hand, 'to know we must share',<sup>89</sup> on the other, says one of the founders, 'if you can control the flow of information, you control everything'.<sup>90</sup> This is linked to a key theme: the great power of large corporations in such sectors ('How can anyone rise up against the Circle if they [The Circle] control all information and access to it?'). This power is also shown by what happens to dissent. A Senator seeks to break up The Circle, but she is later under investigation for 'all kinds of weird stuff' after things were 'found on her computer'.<sup>91</sup> One of the company's founders later tells Mae that this is 'about the hundredth person' the company has done that to.<sup>92</sup> Eventually all politicians succumb to pressure to become 'transparent'—to have a body camera attached to them to track their every move and broadcast it live via The Circle to the world. The rhetoric of democratisation disguises increased centralisation of power in the hands of corporate leaders.

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88 Ibid., 497.

89 Ibid., 151.

90 Ibid., 487.

91 Ibid., 207.

92 Ibid., 488.

The ‘completion of the Circle’ turns out to be the prospect of The Circle taking over the voting process for elections, such that one company chief says ‘it might even eliminate Congress’.<sup>93</sup> Another warns Mae, to no avail, of a ‘totalitarian nightmare’.<sup>94</sup> One of the last scenes is in the aquarium on the company’s campus, in which tuna, a rare octopus, scarce and beautiful seahorses and a shark, all from the Marianas Trench, are brought together (‘reunited’) in a single tank, ‘so they can coexist and create a more natural picture’.<sup>95</sup> In a metaphor for the corporation, the shark eats everything else. To emphasise the metaphor, one of the founders refers to The Circle as the ‘shark that eats the world’.<sup>96</sup>

Eggers also emphasises the *absence* of evil in driving the descent into totalitarianism. While O’Brien, the chief torturer in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is clearly an evil character, most people in *The Circle* are not, with the possible exception of one of the firm’s founders (Stenton, who is probably greedy for money and power). There is certainly not the overtly oppressive bureaucratic apparatus of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Instead, the second founder was just ‘trying to make the web more civil’, while the third is like ‘an eccentric adjunct professor somewhere’ with naive views about openness.<sup>97</sup> Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was tortured into submission, but Mae is gradually captured by the ideology that flows almost inevitably from the nature of the company. She is horrified by the thought that 3 per cent of Circlers voted no to the question ‘Is Mae Holland awesome or what?’, showing tendencies towards authoritarian, vengeful behaviour herself but eventually concluding she has to ‘win them over’.<sup>98</sup> In placing less reliance on overt and pervasive authoritarianism to tell its story, *The Circle* is more persuasive than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and less subject to the criticism that no corporation is as ubiquitous, persuasive or violent as Orwell’s Ministry of Love.

The technology discussed in *The Circle* is not surprising. It all seems plausible given current developments. Some companies are already inserting chips into employee bodies,<sup>99</sup> and the US military is working

93 Ibid., 395.

94 Ibid., 486.

95 Ibid., 474.

96 Ibid., 484.

97 Ibid., 485, 489.

98 Ibid., 408–19.

99 Maggie Astor, ‘Microchip Implants for Employees? One Company Says Yes’. *New York Times*, 25 July 2017; Rory Cellan-Jones, ‘Office Puts Chips under Staff’s Skin’. *BBC News*, 29 January 2015.

on an implant to allow humans to directly interface with computers—that is, to benefit people with aural and visual disabilities.<sup>100</sup> Even the closing sequence, in which Mae demands to know her friend's thoughts, anticipates developments likely to arise in neural link technology.<sup>101</sup> If anything, the book understates the capacity for technological change to be used for surveillance purposes. A founder makes the comment that one of their problems is that 'even when there are cameras everywhere, not everyone can watch everything',<sup>102</sup> but soon artificial intelligence (AI) will make it possible for thousands of cameras to be monitored effectively by a single bot. If there is a criticism to be made of Eggers's view of the future, it is that it ironically makes future technology seem too limited by human frailties and takes not enough account of the power of algorithms and AI.

In the world of dystopian fiction, *The Circle* has fewer evil characters, less overt suppression and less malevolence than the other works featured here and indeed almost all other dystopian works—so much so that the Hollywood treatment of it gives the movie a happy ending (in which Mae chooses to reveal to a huge audience the dark secrets of the company's founders, leading the Tom Hanks character to say 'we are so f—ked'). Yet, as a book, *The Circle* is also the most realistic of the dystopian genre, especially in its musings about the future of work. It is therefore perhaps the scariest of them all. That said, it points to the importance of critical choices in shaping the future. Mae's decision to ignore the urgings of one of the company's founders, including to publicise a document on 'The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age', was crucial in enabling *The Circle* to continue along its shark-emulating path. Perhaps the Hollywood ending points to what outcomes could have been if the more difficult choices, those that move us away from path dependency, had been taken.

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100 Ryan Browne, 'U.S. Military Spending Millions to Make Cyborgs a Reality'. *CNN*, 7 March 2016.

101 Eggers, *The Circle*, 497. Guardian, 'Elon Musk Wants to Connect Brains to Computers with New Company'. *Guardian*, 28 March 2017. See also Antonio Regalado, 'With Neuralink, Elon Musk Promises Human-to-Human Telepathy. Don't Believe It'. *MIT Technology Review*, 22 April 2017. Annalee Newitz, 'Scientists Just Invented the Neural Lace'. *Gizmodo*, 17 June 2015, [www.gizmodo.com.au/2015/06/scientists-just-invented-the-neural-lace/](http://www.gizmodo.com.au/2015/06/scientists-just-invented-the-neural-lace/); Jia Liu et al., 'Syringe-Injectable Electronics'. *Nature Nanotechnology* 10 (2015): 629–36; Bryan Johnson, 'Kernel's Quest to Enhance Human Intelligence'. *Medium*, 20 October 2016, [medium.com/@bryan\\_johnson/kernels-quest-to-enhance-human-intelligence-7da5e16fa16c](https://medium.com/@bryan_johnson/kernels-quest-to-enhance-human-intelligence-7da5e16fa16c).

102 Eggers, *The Circle*, 426–7.

## Conclusions

We have looked at two broad issues here relating to work—working hours and culturism—as well as some others, but we have done so through quite different predictive lenses: the forecasts made up to half a century ago about the direction working time would take, and the storylines of authors of fiction that both pre- and post-dated those forecasts, about cultural management and control. In doing so, we also touched on such issues as gender, performance management and, of course, power. All of this constitutes ‘visions of the future’. Some of those visions border on the idyllic (how else would one describe a world of extreme leisure), others are more like nightmares—and some that look idyllic on the surface (such as the workplace in *The Circle*) turn out to be nightmares, though not necessarily in the way we expected. To use a Gramscian typology, the powerful in all three books used hegemony to maintain control, but in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* force was also heavily relied upon, while *The Circle* was ultimately a story of hegemonic control without even an evil mastermind behind it all.

Those different fictions, we must also acknowledge, say very different things about choice and agency. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* choice is virtually futile, as the Party will always win—at least, as far as the experience of the protagonists indicates. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, choice operates at an individual level, and Offred’s individual act of rebellion, facilitated through a collective resistance network, might just liberate her. We don’t know whether it does, but we do know that, in the end, Gilead falls. In *The Circle*, choice is central, and there are critical junctures—‘this is the moment where history pivots’<sup>103</sup>—where decisions by the players have a monumental effect not only on themselves but on others as well. In effect, these are policy decisions that affect the future, not just decisions about their own welfare. The movie is less plausible than the book, but the two combined are still useful in showing the nature and effect of choices. The two together are a bit of a ‘sliding doors’ experience, like that in Chapter 1.

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103 Ibid., 403.

The problem with many of those forecasts of working time and leisure, mentioned in the early part of this chapter, was that they did not, or could not, take account of society's choices that would be made and the social forces that would emerge. The prognosticators assumed one set of doors would open, but it turned out very different ones opened, leading down a very different track. In the rest of this book, we will see how social choices and social forces interact with technology and markets to produce possible futures of work.

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