

1 *Introduction*

The introduction identifies the book's two main contributions – the explication of the megacorporate concept and of the infinite times ideology – and situates the work with reference to current discussions of Big Tech. In doing so, it is first emphasized that whereas current discussions of Big Tech often adopt a critical, and even a moralizing, tone, the present work strives to comply with an ideal of amoral analysis. The following sections then detail two supplementary contributions that the book makes to the scholarly fields of business and society and organization studies. The first of these domain-specific contributions relates to the book advancing a philosophical perspective, and the second to its demonstrating that corporations can shape social considerations of much broader importance than is commonly recognized. After this, the book's very simple method of construction and its three-part structure are described. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Beyond Big and Bad: An Amoral Analysis

The first two decades of the twenty-first century are notable for the emergence of Big Tech. Whilst open to interpretation, this term is generally used to refer to a select number of American corporations, i.e. Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Google and Microsoft, and their various activities. Further to their often being ranked as the world's largest corporations by market value, these firms are collectively referred to as Big Tech due to their being a major part of daily life for a great many people. On any given day, for example, people around the world will use an Apple device to post a message on Facebook, purchase a product on Amazon, conduct a search on Google and write a document with a Microsoft program.

Given the assumption that those with great power often fail to discharge their responsibilities, it is to be expected that the 'Big Tech'

label has quickly come to possess a negative connotation. Thus, Wu (2018) has suggested that Big Tech is a social, political and economic curse, and Foer (2017) has warned that Big Tech constitutes an existential threat. Likewise, Zuboff (2015: 81) has voiced her concern that Big Tech is responsible for the emergence of the ‘Big Other’: ‘a new universal architecture existing somewhere between nature and God . . . that records, modifies, and commodifies everyday experience . . . with a view to . . . monetization and profit’.

The critiques that these three authors have advanced, along with others of a broadly similar mind (e.g. Morozov, 2011), are often well founded. Yet, in their concern to resist ‘the ideas that fuel these companies’ (Foer, 2017: 8); to ‘struggle for democracy’ and diminish ‘private power’ (Wu, 2018: 138); and to mobilize ‘in the name of humanity and the future’ (Zuboff, 2019: 41), such authors tend to overlook, if not deliberately obscure, a variety of more general, and very fundamental, impacts that Big Tech is having on lived reality.

With the present work, I propose that the idea of a megacorporation can help to further reveal such considerations. Whilst the term ‘megacorporation’ is itself far from new, I am unaware of any sustained effort to detail its meaning. Given as such, the first contribution I make with the present work is to conceive of the megacorporate concept. In short, and as the prefix ‘mega’ indicates, I posit that a megacorporation is defined by its possessing a level of importance and influence that greatly surpasses that of other corporate forms, and by its influencing the lives of a huge number of people in very basic, foundational ways. Given the oversized breadth and depth of their influence, megacorporations will always be more or less limited in number. In fact, there may be times when no corporation is capable of satisfying such demanding criteria.

Apple and Facebook, for instance, are both of sufficient influence as to merit being included amongst the Big Tech brethren. Nevertheless, their respective business interests remain relatively narrow in focus – with Apple being best known for its consumer products and Facebook for social media. And whilst Microsoft and Amazon are more diverse, they likewise remain focused on developments in computing and online commerce respectively. As a result, none of these four companies can currently be considered a megacorporation.

Alphabet on the other hand, which was created back in 2015 through a corporate restructuring of Google, can be considered

a megacorporation given its range of interests. In addition to Google Search, Android and YouTube, each of which have more than a billion users, Alphabet is heavily invested in the health sciences through companies such as Calico and Verily, in automated vehicles through its holdings in companies like Waymo and Uber, in urban design and development through Sidewalk Labs, and in the new space industry through its investment in SpaceX.

Whilst this breadth of investments differentiates Alphabet from its Big Tech contemporaries, it does not make it a unique corporate form. Indeed, there is a relatively significant number of corporate groups around the world that have similarly diversified, or even more diversified, investments: South Korea's chaebol (e.g., Samsung, LG) and Japan's keiretsu (e.g., Mitsubishi) spring to mind. What differentiates Alphabet from these conglomerates, and all other (groups of) corporations, then, is its capacity to shape how we construct and experience the past and the future at both the personal and social levels.

To begin making sense of this last statement, it helps to note that Alphabet's biotech subsidiary Calico is, as *Time* magazine once put it, trying to 'solve death' (McCracken & Grossman, 2013). Even if Calico's efforts prove just partly successful (by pushing death's door just a little farther back for just a few people), Alphabet will help change the experience of personal futures. In many ways, Alphabet's Google has already had such an impact on our personal pasts. The European 'right to be forgotten' ruling, which enables people to ask Google to remove links to (mis)information that would otherwise be returned when someone 'googles' their name, provides one specific manifestation of the megacorporation's influence in such regard.

Alphabet is impacting on similar matters at the social level too. By collecting more and more data on more and more aspects of domestic and communal life, Alphabet investments – such as Orbital Insight, a geospatial analytics organization that works with satellite imagery, and Nest, a smart or connected home company – are helping to build an historical store of information that changes how we can construct and conceive our social pasts. And with its various moonshots, and many other less speculative investments, Alphabet is contributing to a whole new set of means by which future human societies on Earth and beyond might be created and governed.

All of these various impacts, even those that are described as being potential at best, are controversial. In fact, one can commonly pick just

one development that Alphabet is invested in, do a quick search on it and find a whole list of moral concerns. Alphabet's investment in SpaceX – which as a result of its plans to create a huge satellite internet service called Starlink has been accused of starting a project that could 'blight the night sky' for earthbound astronomers (Devlin, 2019) – provides a case in point. In addition to that, reports disclosing the presence of a hidden microphone within a Nest home security system (Amadeo, 2019) provide yet one more illustration of why so many people think of Alphabet entities as spies.

In light of this well-established, Alphabet-focused 'cacophony of critique' (Boland, 2018), the present analysis is more concerned to remain amoral than it is to moralize. Whilst I fall short of achieving this goal – in that the work is unavoidably informed by my own values – I have tried to be morally indifferent in completing the analyses, and building the conceptual constructs, that the book contains. That being said, I also think that this amoral ideal is justifiable. For whereas the concern to morally judge can narrow vision, the concern to amorally understand can broaden it.

This ideal of amoral analysis also informs the book's second contribution: the explication and elaboration of the ideology of infinite times. When conceived amorally, ideology refers to the cognitive structures that shape and limit our experiences (e.g., Jameson, 2016). It also refers to motives that – because they tend to be implicit or taken for granted – give rise to much of what we strive for and much that we want to be (Greimas, 1983: 293; Greimas & Courtés, 1982: 222). It is in this non-pejorative sense of ideology, that the ideology of infinite times is here associated with the widespread concern to indefinitely extend humanity's past and future at both the personal and social levels.

To begin with its historical aspect, the ideology of infinite times can be seen to manifest through the – currently ever-increasing – documentation of daily existence for specific individuals and whole societies. Presuming it is successfully stored and maintained, this information will provide future historians, and anyone else that is interested, with details about daily life that far exceed those that we have had on prior lives and generations up until now. And with regard to its forward-looking aspect, the ideology of infinite times is evidenced by the widespread concern to extend the length of healthy existence for individual humans and to sustain humanity's development for as long as possible.

Further to informing a whole range of activities at the individual, industrial and social levels, the infinite times ideology specifically shapes Alphabet's activities too. Without an awareness of the infinite times ideology, however, Alphabet's diverse activities and interests can seem fragmented and unrelated. What the explication of the infinite times ideology therefore does is show how these diverse ongoing come together to form a whole. It reveals that the concern to expand our temporal horizons as far as possible, both backwards and forwards, plays a key role in ensuring that Alphabet's many interests do not pull it apart.

The explication of the infinite times ideology has a number of other benefits too. First, and given that many others appear to be informed by the ideology of infinite times, the detailing of this ideology helps explain why the masses might actively support Alphabet's huge accumulation of wealth and power – an accumulation that Zuboff (2015) argues is based on an extractive relationship that people could never reasonably consent to.

The identification of the infinite times ideology also suggests that ideological conflicts will increasingly focus on the merits of human civilization and human pre-eminence. At the moment, ideological conflicts are commonly fought from a variety of political-economic perspectives, e.g., libertarian, liberal, democratic, socialist. Whatever else their differences, these political-economic perspectives are all similar in that they tend to take the merit and superiority of humanity for granted. Such assumptions, however, are likely to be increasingly reconsidered if investments by Alphabet, and other similarly informed organizations, continue. The reason why is that these investments can contribute to risks that could undermine the infinite times ideology both directly (e.g., through the risk of technologically induced extinction) and indirectly (e.g., by encouraging those opposed to the infinite times ideology to resist it).

As these initial remarks indicate, by conceiving of the megacorporate construct and the infinite times ideology, I contribute to the flourishing literature on Big Tech by showing that Alphabet is reshaping existence in ways that are more fundamental than are generally recognized. In doing so, I also make two additional contributions to the more specific fields of business and society and organization studies. These contributions relate to my proposing that scholars in these related domains can benefit from a philosophical turn and from an increased focus on how

business organizations influence society. As these field-specific contributions are not of explicit concern throughout the rest of the book, I quickly detail them in the two sections below.

A Philosophical Turn

Underpinning the academic field of business and society teaching and research is the recognition that business plays a significant role within modern societies. Given that this role will often be linked to other organizations or institutions – e.g., governments, laws, religions, the non-profit sector – the business and society literature discusses other actors and structures as well. Nevertheless, the business and society literature remains focused, by definition, on the relationship between commercial activities and communal concerns (Crane et al., 2015; Greenwood & Freeman, 2017). Like other academic fields (e.g., cultural studies, international relations), the field of business and society has been informed by a number of different, and more or less long-standing, theoretical traditions. Consequently, and prior to arguing that the field can benefit from an increased engagement with philosophy, I first differentiate between the ethical, political and socio-economic theoretical traditions that currently dominate.

Ethical Theory

Ethical theory, or what is sometimes termed moral philosophy, is concerned with questions of right conduct, with the prescribing and proscribing of behaviour, and with the promotion of well-being at various levels (e.g., individual, social, environmental). So defined, ethical theory is less descriptive than it is normative: for it identifies what should or should not be done. Whilst any posited link between ethical reasoning and individual welfare/self-interest is a complex matter (Parfit, 1984), ethical theory often suggests that moral action requires some sort of self-sacrifice (Kant, 1997). Widespread notions of honesty and fairness, of equality, of familial responsibilities and so on, commonly require that individuals give up opportunities or resources that they would otherwise enjoy. Ethical theory therefore concerns itself with explaining why such notions or ideals should be complied with.

Within the business and society field, ethical theory has been used and developed to complete a number of tasks. First, ethical theory has

been used to make arguments for and against the existence of business organizational forms and market institutional structures. One example is provided by Donaldson (1982: 48), who, in building on the social contract tradition, has proposed that ‘hypothetical contractors in a state of nature’ would consent to the corporate form’s existence so long as they believed it would lead to an increase in efficiency, and benefit all affected by it. The flipside of this, of course, is that if the corporate form is not thought to meet such standards, then it cannot, according to Donaldson, be morally defended.

Second, and given the presumption that business forms do generally meet the standards set by the likes of Donaldson (1982), ethical theory has been used to make arguments for and against different types of product and service being produced and consumed by them. One clear illustration of this approach is provided by critics of the tobacco business, who propose that as ‘smoking is both addictive and lethal’, it is inconsistent with the common good (Palazzo & Richter, 2005: 388). Many other ‘vice’ or ‘sin’ industries, e.g., alcohol, gambling, pornography, are subjected to similar critiques (Miller & Michelson, 2013: 601).

Third, and given the presumption that both the institution of business and a great many products and services are morally justifiable, there is a body of work concerned with detailing what process standards businesses need to meet, and what responsibilities commercial actors need to discharge, in their various productive activities. The list of concerns such standards relate to is evergrowing. Amongst many other topics, standards have been developed, and responsibilities detailed, with regard to algorithms (Martin, 2019), marketing to the vulnerable (Brenkert, 1998), the amelioration of sweatshop labour concerns (Miklos, 2019), the extent of fiduciary duties (Marcoux, 2003), and women’s empowerment in supply chains (McCarthy, 2017).

Political Theory

Along with the use it has made of ethical theories, the field of business and society has made considerable use of political theory and political philosophy. By and large, business and society scholars informed by the political theory tradition have sought to detail appropriate divisions of labour between business, government and civil society. In

doing so, they have advanced our understanding of long-standing concerns regarding the accountability of corporations to their various constituents or publics (e.g., Clark, 1916; Dodd, 1932).

One illustration of such work is Evan and Freeman's stakeholder theory of the firm, which proposes that economic and political freedoms necessitate that stakeholders (directly) participate in corporate decision-making; that stakeholders and managers should be protected by a 'bill of rights'; and that the 'task of management in today's corporation (i.e., the balancing stakeholder interests) is akin to that of King Solomon' (Evan & Freeman, 1988: 103–105). Although stakeholder theory has changed, Freeman (e.g., Freeman, Wicks & Parmar, 2004) continues to argue that it is essential for protecting stakeholder's political (and economic) freedoms. Stakeholder theory has also come to be more explicitly associated with a libertarian political philosophy. To this end, Freeman and Phillips (2002) have proposed that one of the major benefits we would derive from the increased actualization of stakeholder principles, would be the diminishing of state regulation and the need for coercive control.

Scherer and Palazzo (2007, 2011), by way of contrast, have proposed that it is because states face increasing difficulties in regulating corporate activities and making sure they are directed towards the public good, that corporate decision-making needs to be increasingly aligned with the interests of stakeholders and civil society. The general idea is that liberal models of corporate governance, which are built on a division of labour between profit-focused corporations and (democratic) states concerned to protect and ensure the public good, are breaking down due to the globalization of economic relations and the emergence of governance gaps. In terms of theory, Scherer and Palazzo make use of a 'thin conception' (Durant, 2011) of Habermas's (1990) discourse ethics (see Whelan, 2012: 726). They build on the belief that all affected by a decision should be free to debate it to suggest that corporations should participate within multi-stakeholder initiatives that govern their activities (e.g., the Forest Stewardship Council) or that corporate boards should be comprised of representatives from stakeholder groups and civil society.

Another line of work uses theories of citizenship to make sense of corporate–society relations. This has been done in three ways: First, corporations have been metaphorically conceived as different types of corporate citizens (e.g., deliberative, republican), so as to show how

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different understandings of corporate social responsibility are in effect always informed, whether consciously or not, by broader political philosophies (Moon, Crane & Matten, 2005). Second, it has been argued that corporations can be conceived as administering a set of citizenship rights (Matten & Crane, 2005), particularly when the ‘liberal’ division of labour between business and government breaks down. Third, the idea of ‘citizenship arenas’ (Crane, Matten & Moon, 2008: 9–12) has been used to make sense of the ways in which social media corporations have created new spheres from within which individuals can exert influence over the political-economic actors and structures that surround them (Whelan, Moon & Grant, 2013: 780).

Socio-economic Theory

In contrast to the ethical and political theory disciplines, which tend towards the normative, the discipline of socio-economic theory tends more towards description and explanation. As its hyphenated label suggests, socio-economic theory can be found in various forms throughout the business and society field. Indeed, specific lines of work within this tradition – such as those that adopt a macro focus and investigate the influence of national legal and cultural considerations on corporate governance structures and corporate social responsibility policies and practices – constitute significant literatures in their own right (Crane et al., 2016).

One illustration of such work is provided by Kinderman (2012), who used an institutional lens to explore the co-evolution of corporate social responsibility and neo-liberalism in the United Kingdom between 1977 and 2010. Another is provided by Matten and Moon (2008, 2020), who influentially built on work in ‘national business systems’ (e.g., Whitley, 1997) to differentiate between an ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ understanding of corporate social responsibility that respectively refer to a European approach characterized by coordinated markets and collective obligation, and to a US approach characterized by liberal-market economies and individual discretion.

Unlike the just-mentioned macro-level studies, which focus on how (inter-)national considerations shape the policies and practices of corporations, meso-level studies tend to focus on how individual corporations can legitimate or justify their policies and practices in the face of conflict and reputational threats. Some of these studies, such as Helms’

and Patterson's (2014) analysis of the private corporation that owns the Ultimate Fighting Championship (a mixed martial arts organization), reveal the ways in which corporations can (partially) transform society's understanding of (il)legitimacy.

Much more common, however, are studies that show how corporations comply with societies' existing understandings of (il)legitimate behaviour (Boswell, 1983). In this vein, Patriotta, Gond and Schultz (2011: 1806) built on Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) to show how various forms of justification (e.g., measures of efficiency and sustainability) helped to repair the legitimacy of corporate activities following a safety controversy 'provoked by a major nuclear accident'. Many others have drawn on institutional and resource-dependency theories to complete similar tasks (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995).

These varying strains of socio-economic analysis have advanced our understandings of how business is shaped by institutional norms and practices. Nevertheless, and as with works informed by the ethical and political theory traditions, works informed by socio-economic theory have tended to focus on relatively discrete concerns (e.g., sweatshops, corporate governance, corporate social responsibility, the safety of nuclear energy) that are of interest to relatively limited audiences (e.g., supply chain managers, financiers, civil society organizations, energy industry professionals). A philosophical perspective, by way of contrast, helps bring considerations of more general and wide-ranging interest to the fore.

Philosophy

Philosophy is generally conceived as relating to considerations of central importance to existence and experience. On the one hand, this meaning is suggested by the colloquial references that people make to their 'philosophy' when discussing the guidelines or assumptions that shape their behaviour in daily life: such as 'family first' versus 'money over everything', or 'the best defense is a good offense' versus 'you can't lose if they don't score'. On the other hand, this meaning is also suggested in more formal contexts, where philosophy is associated with questions regarding the nature of being and sentience, the possibility of knowledge and so on.