

# Rationalisation instead of Rationality



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## Corporate Public Spheres between Refeudalisation and Revitalisation

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# Habermas' „Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere“

- The public sphere as a rational mode of communication free of restrictions (Habermas 2015[1962]:121 & 156)
- Public sphere rationalises domination by linking it to reason (311)
- The public sphere is linked to bourgeois society (56 & 122f.)
- Class struggles and PR lead to refeudalisation and pseudo-publics



# Habermas' „Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere“

- Criticism of idealisation and substantialisation of the public sphere while ignoring exclusions  
(Baker 1992; Benhabib 1992; Black Public Sphere Collective 1992; Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; 2007)
- Criticism of the focus on bourgeois forms of the public sphere (Negt/Kluge 1972)
  - Proletarian publics are ignored
- The realm of production and its public spheres are only considered abstractly in Habermas texts (Ganßmann 1990; Elbe 2017)



## 2. Corporate Public Spheres

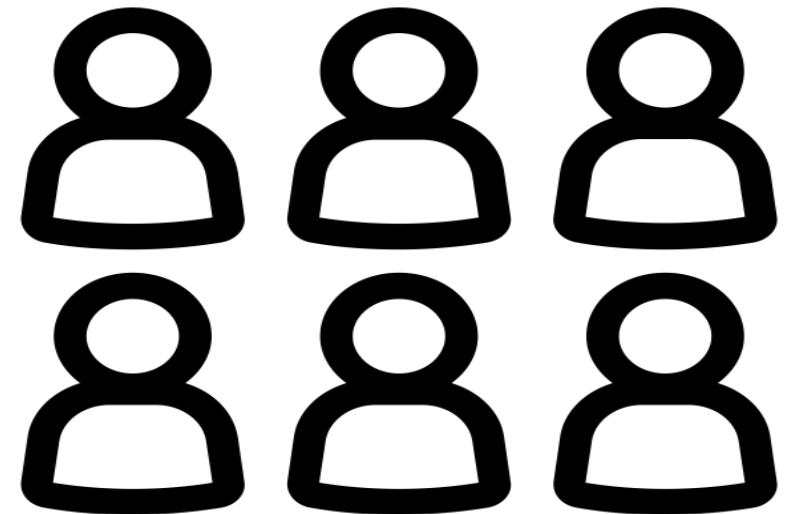
- Companies are "private governments" (Anderson 2019)
  - Domination is not legitimised by reason, but by labour contracts
  - Effectiveness and efficiency instead of insight and reasons
- **Corporate public**= sphere of the employees of a company gathered as an audience
  - It can both secure and challenge corporate authority



## 2. Corporate Public Spheres

Participation in the public sphere in companies is realised in three ways:

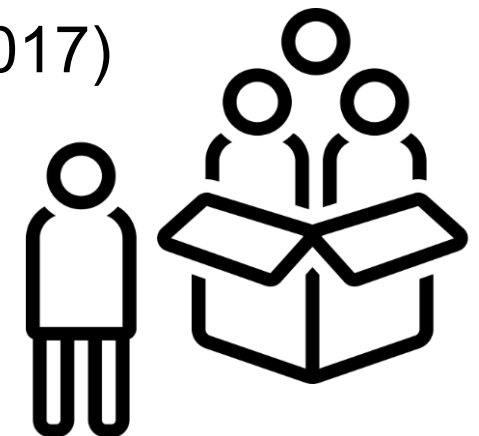
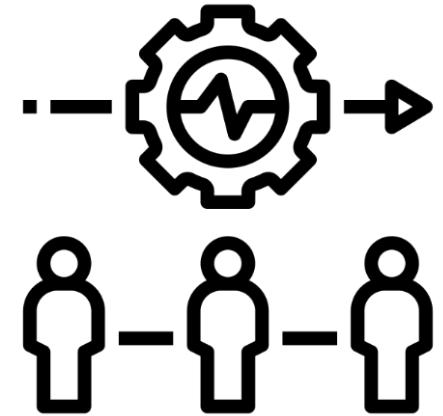
- 1) Institutionalised codetermination (BetrVG),**
- 2) Situationally granted offers of participation by the management and**
- 3) unstructured obstinate publics on the shop floor.**





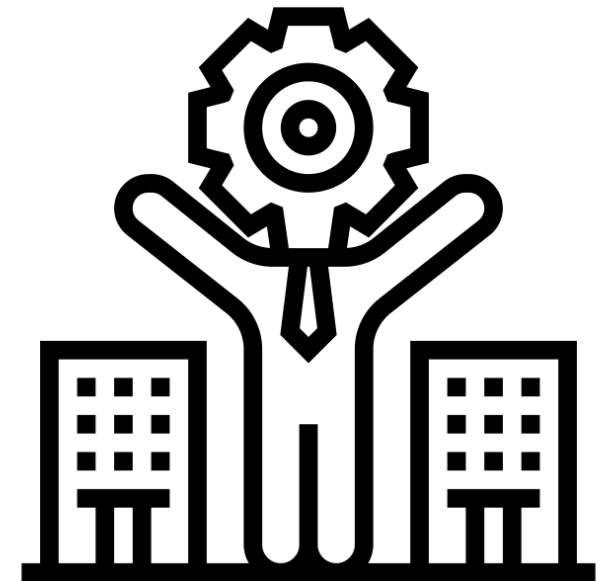
## 3.1 Codetermination: Precarisation of Employment

- Companies are subject to change
  - Restructuring alters the demos of co-determination
- Example: temporary agency work
- Deficits especially in the social-communicative and legal-institutional dimension (Brinkmann et al. 2006)
  - Few social relations and exclusion from co-determination (Brinkmann/Nachtwey 2017)
  - Temporary work as undermining of corporate counter-publics



## 3.2 Situational Participation: Corporate Culture

- Habermas: More publicity but less public reasoning
- Corporate culture as **instrumental public sphere**
  - Company community, company families, company newspapers, quality circles (Krell 1994, Dörre 2002)
- **Situationally and top-down granted publics**
  - Highly regulated and limited in content
  - Goal: workers' knowledge, motivation, internal cohesion
  - Rationalisation instead of rationality



### 3.3 Obstinate Corporate Publics: Digitalisation

- Digital public spheres: comprehensive surveillance (Zuboff 2018) or increased inclusion and reach (Shirky 2011)?





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- Digital public spheres: comprehensive surveillance (Zuboff 2018) or increased inclusion and reach (Shirky 2011)?
- Platform-mediated courier work shows the contested role of obstinate corporate publics



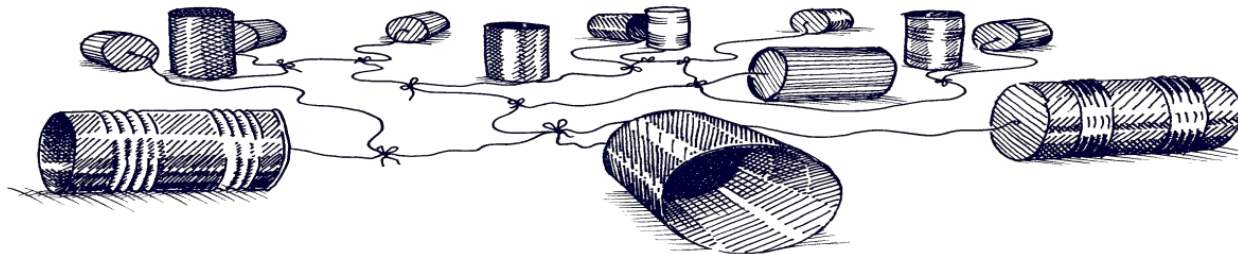
### 3.3 Obstinate Corporate Publics: Digitalisation

- Algorithmic management: automatised organisation of work processes (Lee et al. 2015; Heiland 2018)
  - Algorithms as technological rationality, which consolidates and legitimises corporate power through (quasi)objective decisions
  - 63% of riders say they feel at the mercy of technology very often or often (Heiland/Brinkmann 2020: 135)
  - Functional system integration replaces communicative social integration
- **Refeudalisation**



## 3.3 Obstinate Corporate Publics: Digitalisation

- However: 61% of riders have very frequent or frequent contact with colleagues.
- Contrast of entrepreneurial and plebeian public sphere
  - Platforms established chats as instrumental public sphere to enable collegial self-help
  - In 2017, riders discussed working conditions and works council elections in the chat
  - Deliveroo deleted the critical posts and later deactivated the chat
  - Riders reacted with autonomous chat groups and regained their role as "reasoning private citizens"
- **Revitalisation:** Obstinate corporate public spheres that enable collective action



## 4. Conclusion

- Habermas' concept is suitable for analysing the development, legitimisation and undermining of domination - also in the workplace
- Three types of corporate public spheres:
  - a. Institutionalise codetermination
  - b. Situationally granted participation
  - c. Unstructured obstinate publics
- Refeudalisation tendencies can be observed in all three:  
Limitation, instrumentalisation or obstruction of the public sphere
- Yet, revitalisation through digitalisation as well



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# Thank you for your attention.

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