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Maria Kordowicz · John Mendy

The Absurd Workplace

How Absurdity is
Normalized in
Contemporary Society
and the Workplace

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Matthijs Bal
Lincoln International Business School
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK

Dieu Hack-Polay
Lincoln International Business School
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK

Management
Crandall University
Moncton, Canada

John Mendy
Lincoln International Business School
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK

Andy Brookes
Lincoln International Business School
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK

Maria Kordowicz
Lincoln International Business School
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK

Centre for Interprofessional Education and
Learning, Faculty of Medicine and Health
Sciences
University of Nottingham
Nottingham, UK

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'Let's Absurdify Life'
Fernando Pessoa—the Book of Disquiet

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1

Introduction to Absurdity and Hypernormalization in Contemporary Society and Workplaces

Introduction

While the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement in New York that spurred Occupy movements across the world protested on behalf of the interests of the 99% of the people against the 1% elite members of society which controlled entire economies, policy, and government (Graeber, 2013; Jones, 2015), ten years later, we are confronted with a situation that bear hallmarks of an even more absurd world where only eight men own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world population (Oxfam Novib, 2022). Moreover, it is not despite, but *because* of the COVID-19 pandemic that such phenomenal wealth has been achieved by these eight men. The absurdity of the situation is brought to the fore by the fact that these eight individuals have been able to profit enormously from global disaster and have doubled their wealth during the pandemic while 99% of the global population has seen their income drop during the same corresponding COVID pandemic period (Oxfam Novib, 2022). To add insult to injury, various of these world's richest men have been primarily occupied with competing with each other in developing commercial space travels during the pandemic, while the possibility of leaving an

environmentally, ecologically, and economically broken world behind in search of new spaces in our galaxy to colonize looms large. We are hence witnessing the absurdity of staggering income inequalities in global society, where wealth is not just unequally distributed, but increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few hyperprivileged men. However, it is not just this hyperconcentration of wealth, influence, and power, but also the process through which their enormous wealth is legitimized by governments and some parts of civil society that accentuates the absurdity of the situation—these men are also praised for their ‘entrepreneurial’ spirit and business acumen and heralded as ‘job creators,’ instead of being perceived primarily as people who are able to steal huge amounts of money within the constraints of the law.

Meanwhile in the Netherlands, an unemployed woman living on welfare benefits is charged with a fine of €7000 by her council for not declaring receiving grocery shopping from her mother, who wanted to help her daughter in difficult times (NOS, 2020). The woman should have declared receiving the grocery shopping from her mother as ‘income’ and thus to be subtracted from her welfare benefits. In the days after this news was released, various rumors and gossip were spread that the woman had used her welfare benefits to buy a car (AD.nl, 2021), which was not allowed as welfare benefits are supposed to be spent on primary needs, including food, clothing, and healthcare. At the same time, the Netherlands is still widely known as a tax haven, where both corporations and wealthy individuals can make use of various attractive tax arrangements to avoid paying their taxes. It is striking that those on the lowest incomes in society are hypermonitored and punished severely when they (unknowingly and unintentionally) break the law, while large corporations can financially muster into buying influence in high places so as to shape the laws from which they continue to massively profit from (e.g., Brown, 2019). It is also pertinent how neoliberal society actively punishes helping behavior, solidarity, and acts of kindness, as if they form a considerable threat to the functioning of neoliberal society and a dominant capitalist logic and system. A mother who buys grocery shopping for her daughter on benefits contributes to a breach of the law, which raises the question whether the law and that what is considered to be ‘normal’ (i.e., according to some civic norm) is truly ‘normal’ and what is ‘abnormal.’

Meanwhile, the Dutch airline KLM received €3.4 billion from the Dutch government to survive the COVID-19 pandemic (Rijksoverheid, 2021). The government argued that KLM is important for the Dutch economy and that it provides many jobs at Schiphol Airport and at the airplanes. At the same time, there is increasing understanding that the net contribution of KLM and Schiphol Airport to the Dutch economy and employment is rather modest (De Groene, 2018). Moreover, many employees in jobs provided by KLM and Schiphol are exposed to high levels of particulate matter, causing significant rises in cancer and heart problems among employees (NOS, 2021). And importantly, the subsidizing of the airline industry by government stands at odds with the green targets, set not by Dutch government themselves, but internationally and held up in court. This raises the question whether there is any genuine commitment to climate goals and a more sustainable society, when airlines and other corporate bodies and individuals are saved with billions of euros during an economic crisis, which could have also been spent on the transformation to a zero-carbon society.

These are just some examples which confront us with the absurdities of our contemporary society and call for reflection and deeper analysis. They touch upon the most pressing issues of today's global society, including climate change, wealth inequalities, thuggery, and continued exploitation through our capitalist economic system. For instance, wealth inequalities in our global society are only increasing (Oxfam Novib, 2022), with no real indication that these are addressed properly, rather than merely problematized or noted as inherent or inevitable features of our contemporary society. These are not the only examples; issues abound in our society that elucidate the absurd nature of our contemporary existence. Perhaps such absurdities can be understood as manifestations of the great absurdity of our existence, which is rather unique to modern global society: the absurdity of destruction of our planet for economic profit. In other words, the sacrifice of that what can be considered real (our very planet on which we live) for an imaginary goal (the accumulation of wealth, money, and power) constitutes not merely a potentially destructive paradox of our contemporary world, but is at the same time threatening our very existence: to some extent our life will become even more absurd every day that passes in which the destruction of our planet is *not* taken seriously to

the fullest extent. In that sense, we are alike the tramps in Beckett's Theatre of Absurdity play *Waiting for Godot*, in which the two main protagonists eternally wait for Godot to arrive to provide meaning to their existence and direction. In the meantime, nothing changes and nothing is achieved to address the great challenges of our time.

In the Western world (and in variations beyond the Western world), it is the hegemonic (*post-*) *neoliberal-capitalist* political-economic ideology that continues to structure our reality, which thereby has an inherent tendency to obfuscate absurdity itself. This is by far not unique to capitalism (see, e.g., Yurchak, 2003, 2005 for an in-depth analysis of the absurdity of the Communist dictatorial Soviet Union), but as neoliberal ideology (in its hybrid yet varied and structured manner; Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017) becomes more and more pervasive across the world (e.g., through the flipside of neoliberalism manifesting as authoritarian and exploitative approaches), our current analysis will focus primarily on Western forms and expressions of absurdity and its normalization. As the authors of this book are based in the UK, though with more global backgrounds, the main contextualization of the ideas presented in this book pertains to absurdities in the Western world and especially within the UK, the USA, and Europe with occasional examples drawn from other parts of the world. Questions of global generalizations of absurdity will be discussed later in the book.

Absurdities may differ across contexts, in terms of how they manifest and whether social practices are perceived or recognized to be absurd or merely taken for granted as part of the core fabric of society (e.g., when it comes to the absurdity of a 'natural order and hierarchy' describing the roles of men and women in society). Nonetheless, in this book, we will try to describe and analyze more generalizable, or even universal, forms, manifestations, and underpinnings of absurdity. These absurdities may be structured and analyzed as part of the earlier described 'grand' absurdity of the destruction of the planet for economic profit. In this sense, they form a structure in which human behavior is increasingly detached from some form of 'common sense' and can therefore be understood accordingly as a deviation from ratio (Loacker & Peters, 2015) or devoid of a commonsensical, humanitarian purpose while, at the same time, harming people and the planet (Bal, 2017). Consequently, a double process

can be observed: first, our primary task is to recognize absurdity, to unmask and expose absurdity *for what it really is*. Second, absurdities do not merely present themselves openly to our eyes, but are continuously concealed. Hence, a process of normalization of absurdity is inherent to our society, a process we call, following Yurchak (2003, 2005), *hypernormalization*. Hence, hypernormalization constitutes the normalization of the absurd and unfolds continuously in our society. Hypernormalization is, just as absurdity itself, in need of analysis and understanding. Hence, our book aims not to merely understand manifestations and meanings of absurdity in our society (and workplaces), but inherently related is the need for analysis of its normalization, through which absurdity is perpetually denied, not just actively in the sense of a spoken denial of the absurdity of a social practice, but a smoother integration of absurdity into the core fabric of society—as that what is normal, taken for granted, or merely as an externality of our society—an unwelcome byproduct of civilization (e.g., when wealth inequality or social inequality between different people and races across the world is projected as the byproducts of capitalism rather than being inherent to capitalism or derivatives of capitalism itself). Hence, hypernormalization is about the invisible, hidden nature of absurdities, where we no longer recognize absurdity for what it really is, but where it is hidden, as an inherent feature of the constructed world. This process of normalization is inherent to the absurdity we are interested in, as absurdity often manifests itself as an impossible paradox: what we observe is not merely a paradox resulting from two competing or different logics (Lewis, 2000), but as an impossible paradox, where both options are *worse* (Žižek, 2018). In other words, the impossible paradox consists of the dissolution of multiple logics into a situation where there is no solution or way out anymore. For instance, when philosopher Slavoj Žižek was asked before the 2016 US presidential election whether he backed Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, it was implicitly expected that he would (logically) support the former, given the vulgarity of Trump and his inherently neoliberal program. However, in identifying the absurdity of the contemporary democratic system in the USA, he was well aware that both options were worse and a choice for Trump would at least necessitate the mobilization of the left-wing counterforces, while a Clinton presidency would only signify maintenance of the status quo of

neoliberal capitalism with a ‘human face’ (Žižek, 2018). His reply that he would therefore choose Trump over Clinton led commentators to wrongly assume his support for Trump, whereas it was merely indicative of the absurdity underpinning the choice between Clinton and Trump: what is needed is a radical alternative, a third way that enables us to theorize, analyze, and imagine possible alternatives out of absurdity (Žižek, 2009). To do so, it is needed to identify and understand the process of hypernormalization and in particular its ideological underpinnings. We will use ideology in Žižekian terminology as a fantasy construction that structures reality (Žižek, 1989, p. 45). Ideology therefore does not offer an escape from reality, but reality itself (*cf.* Seeck et al., 2020). In this sense, absurdity functions as either a fantasy itself or the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized and for which ideology offers an escape. In Chap. 3, we will explore in depth such ideological underpinnings of absurdity and hypernormalization.

The necessity of linking absurdity and hypernormalization to ideology as a ‘grand’ concept is rooted in the fundamental elements of absurdity itself. Absurdity may have some more mundane connotations, in the (individual) experience of a situation to be absurd. For instance, Nagel (1971) uses the example of someone being knighted and whose pants fall down to identify an absurd situation, including the feelings of emotions such as shame, guilt, and embarrassment. On an equal measure, Beckett dramatizes about timelessness and lack of plot in a world where two tramps are caught up having to wait for a ‘Godot’ that they never knew would appear to save them from their bewilderment and desperation. However, it is not merely these types of absurdities we will discuss in this book. While such absurdities might have profound emotional, and perhaps even traumatic, consequences for an individual, they are different from the absurdities we aim to analyze here: we aim to understand when social practices are absurd and hence refrain from in-depth discussing individual examples of experienced absurdity, even though social practices can be individually perceived to be absurd. While we will not precisely define absurdity and thereby narrowing potential social practices to be absurd only if they meet the narrow requirements of the definition, we set out to observe, describe, and analyze absurdities in society and workplaces as they unfold before us—in trying to understand how practices

are absurd from an observer's point of view. Our 'light' conceptualization of absurdity involves two key aspects that describe the relevance of the type of absurdities we aim to study. Our central analysis of absurdity entails the nature of absurdity as *tragic* and as *not innocent*.

First, absurdity is *tragic*, as it violates and impedes the dignity of one or more individuals and, in extension, could also violate the dignity of our planet (Bal, 2017). Hence, a defining feature of the absurdities we analyze in this book is that they cause harm and thus are tragic; the impossible paradox of different logics which are operating simultaneously, each of its own with its rationality and purpose, becomes impossible as it presents itself as an impossible choice between two evils: if it would have been easy to choose one over the other in lieu of its preference for the protection of the dignity of those involved (not just people, but in extension considering the very planet of our existence), it would have been a mere case of harmfulness towards individuals. The tragic nature of absurdity also requires a minimum of dignity: the experience of concentration camps in WWII cannot be merely called absurd or tragic, as it entailed a situation of dissolution of dignity altogether and represents something that is 'simply too terrible to deserve this designation' (Žižek, 2009, p. 111). In other words, describing some of our (historical) social practices, such as the concentration camps, as absurd does not produce a deep grounding; it is that which extends beyond absurdity, something which is too terrible to witness, where our current analysis ceases to be meaningful, and therefore the inherent limitations of absurdity should be acknowledged. Nonetheless, it is the case that an initially absurd situation which has tragic effects in terms of human dignity may spiral into violence and human suffering that extends beyond absurdity, as many wars have shown, including the recent war in the Ukraine, whereby the initial absurdity of the Russian invasion quickly escalated into sheer violence and human suffering.

In contrast to absurdity as the impossible paradox, other forms of paradox denote a situation in which the existence of a tension between logics is central (Putnam et al., 2016), but which does not necessarily have to be harmful, for instance, when it is merely about competing logics which contradict each other when functioning simultaneously. Therefore, in further precisising Lewis (2000), not every paradox is absurd, and it is only

when we are confronted with an impossible paradox that absurdity arises. It is in the impossibility of the paradox, or the impossibility to choose one logic over the other (e.g., the dominant Western logic of capitalism over welfarism), while both have to be firmly rejected, that harm is created. Therefore, the tragic nature of absurdity becomes fully manifest in the analysis of its kind of paradoxical nature. While there is fundamentally no better choice, as both options are worse, its tragic nature is fully revealed: ultimately suffering, hurt, and pain are inherent to such absurdities. In the example about global inequality mentioned above in the introduction, it is not merely that an extremely small group of men accumulate incredible wealth (and thus power), but it is absurd because their wealth is generated through exploitation of the most vulnerable people on the planet, who must suffer for the benefit of the few privileged ones. To take the analysis one step further here: absurdity arises here not just in the difference between the powerful rich versus the exploited masses, but because of the impossible paradox underpinning inequality: while those very few individuals who accumulate extraordinary power and wealth do so because they *can*, it is also because they are praised for doing so by the public and sometimes absurdly by those who have been exploited by the very privileged few. Obscene wealth is not looked down at, but perceived as an act of heroism. The tales have been told in Nigeria where some state governors are lauded by abjectly poor masses for having stolen millions of dollars from their federal states' health, education, housing, and other fundamental day-to-day services.

These men are praised for their entrepreneurial leadership and portrayed to be heroes of our time. For instance, Elon Musk is not simply a successful lucky man who was able to profit from selling his IT company and thereby expand his empire and become the wealthiest man on the planet, but he is also seen as a hero who symbolizes the ideal neoliberal entrepreneurial attitude. James Ibori, the former governor of Nigeria's Delta State between 1999 and 2007 who stole hundreds of millions of pounds while in office and used his illicit gains to buy property in the West and the Middle East, was being praised in his homeland despite being found guilty by a London court and sentenced to 13 years for fraud. Hence, the impossible choice that people are confronted with is nothing less than the choice between acceptance of rising inequalities

with its inherent destructive effects on those at the bottom of the income pyramid and the choice of the necessity of confrontation with the very nature of contemporary society that led to these inequalities. While the former seems to be the choice that has to be dealt with (i.e., unmasking people's accepting attitudes towards exploitation of the poorest on the planet), it is the latter that seems to be the proper difficult task, as it does not merely refer to the tragic nature of absurdity, but also to the potentially dangerous nature of unmasking absurdity. This dangerous nature of absurdity legitimizes its normalization, as unmasking absurdity might expose the harmful nature of it, and, in Lacanian terminology, exposes the gap between the Symbolic and the Real (Eyers, 2012).

Absurdity is of interest, therefore, as it is never innocent and has an inherently explosive potential. This is the second defining feature of absurdity we are interested in in this book. Hence, even though the example of the person who is knighted and whose pants fall down (Nagel, 1971) may seem arbitrary and, while absurd, not tragic per se, there is always the possibility of an explosive potential. For instance, in this case, the pants falling down expose the masquerade behind the social practice, the meaninglessness in the act of being knighted—it is in this example where the classic case of the naked emperor is reversed: not the emperor is naked, but the humble individual, perhaps knighted for bravery or for long-term commitment to a societal cause, is the one who stands naked in front of the audience. Therefore, this example directly refers to the naked emperor or governor, reflecting the ultimate lesson from the naked emperor or governor: it was never merely about the child or a court of law exposing that the emperor is naked, but it was about the people who merely take for granted the structure of society and leadership (i.e., a leader can only be the leader because the people treat her/him as such), and thus it is the people themselves who are 'naked' and, thus even in a moment of honorable dignity (e.g., Bayefsky, 2013), remain themselves in relation to the queen who has the right to knight the individual, thereby accepting themselves in their inferior position vis-à-vis the queen. After all, it is shame and embarrassment one experiences in this moment, a shame that coincides with the shame of being in this position of 'being knighted' by an authority that can only be based on the absurdity of constructed reality and the knighthood itself an honor that has no meaning

other than that of its very social construction. Moreover, the shame also extends to the observer, whose own ‘ambivalent repulsion/fascination with the spectacle’ (Žižek, 2009, p. 120) becomes the target of the whole scene. Hence, the question also pertains to what kind of absurdity is exposed in such situation and whose shame is actually experienced here.

Hence, absurdity is never innocent, as also the abundance of absurd art and fiction show. While art and fiction are about particularistic truths (Bruner, 1986), or individual, personalized truths that *could be*, rather than what *is*, they are informative of the state of the world and often, through absurd humor, expose the functioning of society, social practice, and workplaces. It is through such examples of absurdism in art and fiction that the potentially dangerous nature is revealed to an extent it becomes readily accessible to the individual. For instance, Kafka’s work shows the inherent undignifying and absurd nature of bureaucracy, thereby elucidating the absurdity of bureaucracy in a way not easily achieved through information or academic knowledge exchange alone—as it reaches its readership through emotion and feeling, it accomplishes what non-fiction has difficulty to achieve. Hence, if absurdity is about the tragic impossible paradox, which has to be concealed and normalized in order to be maintained and preserved, there is always an inherently dangerous potential if unmasked. Therefore, absurd art and fiction may play a dual role, in bringing absurdity to the fore (thereby unmasking absurd social practices) and at the same time legitimizing the status quo by bringing absurdity into the dimension of the arts. In classic liberal terminology, economy and culture can be distinguished in two separate dimensions: while the economy serves as the mechanism that ensures human survival (through offering a capitalist market to arrange and distribute goods and services), culture is then distinguished as that which makes life human and where individuals try to fill the void that is left in capitalist exploitation and meaninglessness. Along these terms, absurd art as cultural manifestation can as easily be disregarded as belonging to that separate dimension, which at its premium is able to express that ‘what makes us human,’ but which nonetheless never adequately describes the hard rulings of the market. Nonetheless, it is interesting how across neo-liberal regimes, and especially its authoritarian derivatives, it is the humanities faculties at universities and the arts in general that are often

attacked and marginalized through exposure to the 'rules' of the neoliberal market (i.e., survive economically, or disappear altogether) or sometimes directly suppressed. The inconsistency of denial of arts as being able to express something meaningful about the sphere of the economy, while at the same time reducing its potential impact through marginalization, and at times, sheer oppression, is another indication of the potentially dangerous of absurdity. If art and fiction similar to the Theatre of the Absurd in Beckett's time have the possibility to expose absurdities of social practice, it either needs to be marginalized (while publicly disavowed) or squeezed into capitalist logic, thereby compromising on its inherent meaning (i.e., that art should exist *outside* of the domain of economic logic). Hence, the very existence of absurd art and fiction indicates the potentially dangerous nature of absurdity, something that will be analyzed in greater depth later on in the book.

In sum, the tragic and dangerous nature of absurdity and its normalization plays a complex role in contemporary society, whereby it is not just a matter of a hidden nature of absurdity, which is in need of exposure, such that society can create a more straightforward relationship between enunciation and practice (i.e., that public discourse is an accurate reflection of 'actual' social practice). In contrast, this 'hidden,' or ideological, nature of absurd practices is continuously surfacing, showing its tragic and dangerous potential. It is therefore relevant to study its normalization, or the process through which absurdities are taken for granted, accepted, whereby its tragic nature is concealed. It is therefore that a complex dynamic has to be understood, whereby absurdities are problematized and sometimes even by those who were principally involved in creating these absurdities (e.g., the World Economic Forum, 2022, addressing and 'fixing' global wealth inequalities, or the UN talking about 'fixing' a climate catastrophe), but at the same time continue to exist and actively normalized. The following book will address these dynamics in greater detail and present various case studies in which absurdities and hypernormalization are discussed, analyzed, and explored in greater detail. Yet, before presenting the theoretical Chaps. 2 and 3, in which we discuss the theoretical foundations of absurdity, hypernormalization, and the role of ideology in understanding them, we will now turn to the manifestation of absurdity in the varied academic disciplines as

well as in fiction. This will elucidate in greater detail the nature of how absurdity is discussed in the academic literatures (e.g., in philosophy and organization studies), as well as in fiction. Through presenting these non-exhaustive examples of absurdity, we are able to frame our subsequent work in the book accordingly, taking into account the work that has been done before and supporting the theoretical anchoring of this book.

Absurdity in Philosophy

Absurdity is discussed in a variety of social sciences and disciplines. Even though generally, absurdity has remained somewhat absent from philosophical discussions, there are a few philosophers who have discussed absurdity. Most notably, Kierkegaard and existentialist Albert Camus spoke directly about the absurdity of life and therefore are of relevance in laying the groundwork for our conceptualization and use of absurdity in this book. Camus discussed explicitly the absurdity of life, especially in his *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Essentially, this essay from Camus is about the meaning of life in a 'godless' world and whether a life without the belief in an afterworld can still be meaningful. If life is all there is for human beings, and when it ceases with death, would there be any meaning to life itself? It is here that Camus introduces the absurdity of life, or the idea that human beings live their lives without being or becoming aware of this absurdity of the inherent meaninglessness of life, given the absence of an afterlife. Yet, people do not commit suicide when discovering the meaninglessness of life, and hence, there is a more complex process unfolding in humans. Camus argues that humans have difficulty understanding the full complexity of the world and, at the same time, are confronted with the disinterest of the world towards the human being. It is therefore that people often turn to (some form of) religion, in order to gain a sense of control over one's own life and the inherent meaninglessness of human existence on earth, just as the two tramps in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* rested their hopes for a better life to a 'Godot' they never saw.

Camus proposes as a way out of this conundrum that one should embrace or transcend absurdity (Blomme, 2013; Mintoff, 2008). This

entails that humans would consciously overcome the absurdity of the paradox between the 'rational' human being and the irrational, complex world, through living one's life with as much intensity and vigor as possible (Blomme, 2013). This could be achieved, for instance, through the creative act (like art, which transcends the absurdity of life). It is in this embracing of absurdity, according to Camus, that absurdity is transcended; when one finds meaning of life through creation or in art, the more absurd it will seem to lose this very life. Suicide is out of question when one has found such meaning, and therefore, it is through this kind of reversal that one may escape out of the deadlock of meaninglessness. Nonetheless, such transcendence also involves an act of rebellion and revolt (Blomme, 2013). In other words, breaking out of the deadlock of absurd life through embracing it also involves an act of rebellion, a going against the reifying of a particular meaning system (Hawkins, 2019), in order to break through the 'existential paradox' (Hawkins, 2019). This might also explain partly the inherent link between absurdity and normalization, as absurdity manifests itself through the confrontation between a human being and the world, between human beings' need for consistency and order and the randomness of the world. Yet, to avoid this confrontation, absurdity is normalized. In this vein, Hawkins (2019) refers to the Camusian 'absurd moment,' which could be a defining moment out of the deadlock.

The absurd moment is a moment when the void is opened up and when an individual asks the 'why' of a meaning system (Camus, 1942). It is at this moment that one realizes the arbitrary nature of things, the absurdity of one's life vis-à-vis the indifference or silence of the world. It is not surprising that such moments are related to strong feelings of anxiety, stress, desperation, and hopelessness, but they can also be related to amazement and wonder and a timeless eternity of possibilities. It may also be linked with a total loss of hope, something that not necessarily has to be perceived as negative (Žižek, 2017). This feeling may actually open up ways to the earlier mentioned rebellion against hegemonic meaning systems, but also a rebellion against the absurd nature of life itself. This involves a rejection of certainties and thus an embracing of absurdity itself. The question, however, is to what extent individuals allow themselves this absurd moment to actually happen in their lives and to what

extent there is an internalized pressure *against* this absurd moment, this moment of realization of the absurdity of all. If an (implicit) expectation of anxiety-arousal co-aligns the absurd moment, it is also not surprising that individuals protect themselves through disavowal, or a denial of absurdity. It is in this sense that absurdity is always contrasted (Nagel, 1971), as a binary distinction between absurd-normal, between absurd-meaning, and between absurd-ratio. Therefore, absurdity seems to be about not just a paradox (i.e., the conflict between two or more logics), but about the impossible choice people are confronted with as an inherent aspect of human life. It was Camus who was well aware of this, and while finding resolution to the absurdity deadlock through proposing embracing absurdity through creation and art, it also has to be acknowledged that this might be too *elitist*, presupposing a creative potential in every human being (notwithstanding the difficult of defining creativity) or an assumption that the absurdity paradox would be more common among those human beings with creative potential or those who can imagine a way out of absurdity. In other words, what does it *really* have to say about the lives of ‘ordinary people’ in society and in workplaces and about the absurdity of social practices? We will explore this in greater detail later on in the book.

Literary-, Art-, and Fiction-Based Absurdity

As alluded to before, it is perhaps in fiction, drama, and art that absurdity has received the greatest attention. If we follow Camus in his observations about the fundamental meaninglessness of the world and the vain attempt of humanity to postulate meaning in absurdity without properly embracing it, rebelling against it, it can also be stated that in art, the greatest attempts can be found against the rational human being and against the perspective of rational existence. After all, it is art, drama, and fiction which provide the space to move beyond the rational and to distance itself from the objective, goal-driven, and purposeful nature of contemporary existence, or at least in the form it desires to present itself to the modern human being. Even in the context of the examples presented earlier in this chapter, including wealth inequalities and climate change,

there is still a dominant notion of goal-driven, purposeful action (e.g., ‘global emissions need to be halved by 2050’...), which ignores or denies the absurd nature of the problems themselves and the impossibility to solve such challenges via ways that do not address the deeper causes behind the problems. It is art and fiction that may expose such hidden manifestations, but also more directly, the absurd nature of contemporary life and practices.

The absurdist fiction referred to as the Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin, 1960) followed Camusian philosophy and included works of Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. These plays are absurd as they deviate from logical syllogism and where its outcomes are always unknown. For the spectators, it is not so much about asking themselves whether a goal is achieved (e.g., whether Godot arrives in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*) or what the next step will be in the play, but whether the next event will aid to their understanding of what is happening and what its meaning is (Esslin, 1960). In this sense, it is properly absurd, as in the absence of logic and rationality, meaning must be found given the constraints of the complexity of what is there and the void of a world empty of sense (Starkey et al., 2019). An interesting perspective was offered by artist Sterling Melcher (2022), who problematized the male-dominated focus of the Theatre of Absurdity writings from Esslin (1960) as well as Camusian writings on absurdity, which consistently talks about the ‘absurd man,’ as if absurdity is an experience exclusive to men—while the absurdity of gender constructions (e.g., a ‘natural’ order between men and women) remains something to be taken into account when further exploring absurdity.

There are various examples of absurdity in (modern) fiction. Another prime example of absurdity manifesting in literature concerns the work of Kafka. Franz Kafka elucidated the absurd nature of modernity and especially the absurd effects of bureaucracy on people. It is in his novels such as *The Trial* and *The Castle* absurdity reveals itself in the anonymous nature of the modern organization, where individuals battle with faceless bureaucracy, being pushed around and caught up in absurdity. Kafka thereby exposes the ‘dark labyrinth’ that bureaucracy can become (Clegg et al., 2016). Kafka perhaps in this sense also foregrounds Camus, with his exposure of the meaninglessness his protagonists experience in relation to the silence and indifference of the world (the legal system/the

government). Each of his novels are absurd, as they unmask this gap, something which Camus would more fully develop in his work around absurdity. Kafka's work remains poignant and is still often used in organization studies to understand the contemporary nature of organizations (e.g., Clegg et al., 2016; Nisar & Masood, 2020). Moreover, the term 'Kafkaesque' has come to indicate that what is contradictive, ironic, and full of despair (Clegg et al., 2016). In the remainder of this book, we will present more examples from fiction to highlight the nature of absurdity in our society and how it unfolds for individuals and in workplaces.

Complementary Perspectives on Absurdity and Its Normalization

While absurdity has been discussed in philosophy and arts/fiction, it has been somewhat absent in other fields. For instance, it is striking that (perceptions of) absurdity are absent from discussions in psychological research, so it remains rather opaque how to understand psychologically the human experience of absurdity. Perhaps closest to discussing absurdity is the psychoanalytic framework as used by philosophers Freud, Lacan, and Žižek. In identifying the great paradoxes of human life, psychoanalysis has always been close to identification of the absurdities and irrational dimensions of human life and therefore provides a relevant insight into the nature, manifestation, and consequences of absurd social practices. While psychoanalysis has experienced a process of individualization with the tendency to use psychoanalytic therapy for individual adaptation to society (the so-called new Revisionist Freudian school; Marcuse, 1955), it is important to understand that originally, Freud was concerned with social circumstances, for instance, as evidenced in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1930). While not speaking directly about the absurdity of social practices/civilization, Freud did point to the alienating force behind civilization and the creation of a feeling of discontent (*Unbehagen*) as a result of the realization of the illusionary nature of religion—or the shattering of existentialist certainties in human life. It is here, that Freud also foregrounds what Camus would speak of later in

the sense of the existentialist crisis following the meaninglessness of human life in a 'godless world.' Hence, the meaning of psychoanalytic traditions for the understanding of absurdity and its normalization is profound and will be particularly discussed in Chap. 3, where we will discuss the ideological underpinnings of absurdity and hypernormalization. As alluded to before, absurdity may function as a fantasy and, therefore, has deep links with psychology, even though contemporary (mainstream) psychology tends to disavow the role of fantasy in its hegemonic theorizing. It is our task, therefore, to recapture and revalue the psychology of fantasy to understand *why* absurdity is so hard to unmask due to its perpetual normalization. It is philosopher Žižek, who adds to contemporary psychological academic work by offering the possibility of *criticalizing* existing dominant notions in psychology, such as the focus on attitudes, cognition, and automatic processes to explain human behavior. It is time, therefore, to offer complementary perspectives to enrich the psychology of absurdity. In so doing, we will not just borrow from philosophy and the arts, but also from other fields, including anthropology and history, both of which have discussed in depth the absurdities of historical events and practices. In particular Alexei Yurchak's (2003) work is enormously important to our conceptualization of hypernormalization, as it was his anthropological study of the late Soviet Union which spurred the coinage of the term hypernormalization. While Yurchak did not speak directly of an absurdity of the late Soviet Union, the presence of absurdity can be inferred from not only his work, but also from historical accounts and collective memory. Strikingly pictured in the TV series *Chernobyl*, it can be observed how the Soviet Union had entered an all-encompassing state of absurdity, when during the collapse of the nuclear reactor, the first attempts were aimed at nullifying the actual event, until the nuclear disaster was noticed by Swedish radars and the traumatic reality could no longer be hidden by authoritative discourse (i.e., public denial of a nuclear disaster). This image would represent much of the post-Stalin Soviet Union, in which reality and authoritative discourse (i.e., the discourse allowed under the Communist regime) became increasingly detached from each other. This gap represented the absurdity of the system itself, as well as life in the Soviet Union. The relevance of the Chernobyl disaster has remained for decades, not merely in

relation to the late Soviet Union, but as a legacy of this past, haunting both Russia, Ukraine, and Europe, as evidenced in the recent Ukraine war, where the remainders of the power plant pose another nuclear threat to the entire European continent. It is precisely in this way that absurdities of the past still haunt the ‘modern’ world, which seems unable to escape its former predicaments. It is therefore also appropriate to assume it safe to link our conceptualization and use of absurdity with the process of hypernormalization as discussed by Yurchak, as what his work referred to in terms of hypernormalization (i.e., the active normalization of authoritative language which was impotent in describing reality, creating a gap between discourse and what was actually going on) could be easily conceptualized as an act of absurdity itself. It is an alienating experience to observe state propaganda in authoritarian regimes (e.g., dancing girls on Chinese television, singing people on green grass on Myanmarese television), primarily because of its inherent absurdist features: what is shown is so distinctly different from reality as it can be observed directly outside on the streets in the respective countries. We are confronted here with the conspicuous gap between authoritative discourse and visible practices or perceived reality. The question here pertains to how this can be explained: why does this explicit gap exist so openly, and what is achieved by maintaining the gap rather than more actively describing social reality as experienced by the people? While not referring explicitly to such terminology, Yurchak’s analysis of hypernormalization confronts the reader with the inherent absurdities existing in the (late) Soviet Union, especially as these absurdities are continuously concealed to some extent, thereby obscuring its tragic and dangerous nature. Hence, Yurchak’s work will be enormously influential in our analysis of how absurdity is normalized in contemporary society and workplaces and how these questions can be answered.

Outline of the Book

This book is structured as follows: while this first chapter aims to introduce the main concepts and ideas behind the book, the subsequent two chapters will serve to understand in greater depth the meanings,

manifestations, and underpinnings of absurdity and hypernormalization in contemporary society and workplaces. Chapter 2 offers a theoretical exploration of the concept of absurdity, building on the aforementioned theoretical approaches from philosophy, literature, and psychology. We discuss what absurdity is, how it can be framed in relation to existing concepts (e.g., paradox), and it is not (e.g., comparing with literatures on stupidity, bullshit, alienation, and strange capitalism). Moreover, it will discuss in depth the role of normalization of absurdity, which we refer to as hypernormalization (Yurchak, 2005). Hypernormalization concerns how absurdity is normalized and taken for granted. Hypernormalization has both collective and individual features and is therefore in need of greater understanding in terms of how it emerges, unfolds, and is maintained over time. Chapter 3 follows this, by discussing the ideological underpinnings of absurdity and hypernormalization. It will discuss the role of fantasy in understanding absurdity and its normalization and explores the fantasmatic, ideological nature of the core concepts of this book. In so doing, the chapter will elucidate not only the ways through which maintenance of absurdity can be understood, but also the ways through which absurdity can be contested and hypernormalization can be addressed.

The subsequent Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 all present case studies on absurdity and hypernormalization and showcase in depth the manifestations of absurdity and hypernormalization in the contexts of inequalities in the workplace (Mendy), literary analysis to understand absurdities in the public sector (Kordowicz), race relationships in the workplace (Hack-Polay), the impunity of organizational and political leaders (Brookes), and climate inertia (Bal). Each of these chapters discusses how absurdities manifest in these contexts, how they are maintained, and how they could be addressed. In summarizing and learning from these case studies, Chap. 9 discusses possible ways out of absurdity and hypernormalization and presents a framework based on four stages, including problematizing, resisting, imagining, and transforming. Various examples are presented for each of these strategies and discussed to what extent they could be considered more and less effective in addressing absurdity. The final chapter will summarize the book and will discuss all elements not previously discussed.

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2

Theoretical Foundation: A Multidisciplinary Review of Absurdity and Hypernormalization

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we introduced the topic of the book and demonstrated how we are not merely living in absurd times as denoted by the great absurdity of the destruction of our planet for economic profit, but that life itself can be regarded as ‘absurd’ in Camusian terms—while meaningless in the inevitability of death, the absurdity of life manifests itself through our pretension of meaning in our activities, a predicament which, according to Camus, can be escaped through embracing absurdity and engaging in creative acts. While the previous chapter bridges the understanding of absurdity as a social phenomenon (i.e., the absurdity of destruction of our planet for economic profit constitutes a global ‘enterprise’) with absurdity as an individually experienced phenomenon (i.e., Camusian absurdity of life itself in its experienced meaninglessness), this chapter will further bring the social and individual together in the exploration of absurdity in social practice. We will focus on the maintenance of absurdity through its normalization into the taken-for-granted assumptions in society, which may be addressed (e.g., it is striking how inequality is widely addressed as a problematic feature of contemporary society), but never adequately enough to properly change social circumstances

(inequalities remain on the rise; Oxfam Novib, 2022). In this chapter, we will therefore further unpack the meanings and manifestations of absurdity, as well as introducing the concept of hypernormalization to understand how absurdity is normalized and maintained as a social phenomenon whose meaningfulness or meaninglessness may be experienced individually.

We will also differentiate absurdity from conceptually related phenomena, such as paradox (Lewis, 2000), stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Paulsen, 2017), bullshit management or jobs (Graeber, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2020; Spicer, 2013), post-truth (Foroughi et al., 2019), nonsense (Tourish, 2020), alienation (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021), and strange capitalism (Cederström & Fleming, 2012). While all of these concepts describe phenomena that engage with absurd features of contemporary society and workplaces, they do not directly engage with absurdity nor explore the meanings of absurdity in relation to these concepts. Absurdity assumes a distinction between that what can be considered 'normal' and what is considered to be 'abnormal' and 'absurd.' It is therefore that normalization theory (e.g., Ashforth & Anand, 2003; May & Finch, 2009) comes into play in the process of understanding absurdity. While normalization theory usually refrains from directly discussing the distinctions between functional normalization (i.e., projecting a 'norm' in order to ensure smooth functioning) and dysfunctional normalization (e.g., where in order to achieve 'efficient functioning,' absurdity prevails), such theory describes well how social practices become institutionalized and integrated into daily human functioning. However, in contrast to these literatures, we will argue that in principle every process of normalization entails the possibility of hypernormalization, as the processes that are described under normalization (e.g., institutionalization, socialization; Ashforth et al., 2007; May & Finch, 2009) are perhaps too easily adopted in the process by which human beings normalize absurdity. It is precisely the blurring distinction between what is considered to be normal and abnormal that is core to the process of normalization. In this chapter, we will unpack such distinctions between the blurred boundaries of normalization and abnormalization to more closely describe absurdity.

Absurdity

Absurdity is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as ‘against or without reason, incongruous, unreasonable, or illogical’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). Absurdity originates from the Latin term ‘absurdus,’ which refers to something that is out of tune, discordant, awkward, uncivilized, ridiculous, or inappropriate. Hence, the variety of meanings of absurdity are broad-ranging, and it remains complex to present a strict definition of when something can be denoted as absurd and thus what is not considered as absurd. While we have described the features of absurdity (i.e., tragic and dangerous) in the previous chapter, these do not precisely differentiate between what is absurd and what is not. For instance, there may be practices which are tragic and dangerous, but which are nonetheless not necessarily absurd. In conceptual terms, the tragic and dangerous nature of absurdity refers to the *necessary* yet *insufficient* aspects of defining absurdity: they are inherently part of the types of absurdity we describe in this book and therefore are necessary to integrate into our conceptualization. Yet, they are also insufficient in fully describing the absurdities we are interested in. To be able to work with a clearer definition of absurdity in the current book, we will discuss two important aspects of how absurdity can be understood.

First, and in line with the dictionary definition, absurdity denotes something that is considered in contrast to logic and reason, *alongside its feature of inappropriateness*. Absurdity assumes the coexistence of multiple logics which jointly form an impossible paradox, leading to a result that can no longer be explained rationally. For instance, to quote a Kafkaesque example, bureaucracy is implemented in organizations to achieve fairness and consistency in organizational practices, a logic which comes to contradict the logic of professional or human autonomy or celebrating individual differences in diversity. The result may become absurd when individuals are no longer able to fulfill their job roles consistently and with fairness and may sometimes be victims of the same bureaucratic system that was purportedly designed to promote workplace effectiveness and greater efficiency. It is a case of contradicting logics, each of its own reasonable, but jointly creating absurdity in its irrationality and lack of

adaptability. The impossible paradox is present in this example through the mutual dependence of both logics on each other: while bureaucracy aims to provide consistency and fairness (and thus the right for individuals to be treated as equals), professional autonomy relies on the inherent dignity of the individual and the possibility for individuals to enact upon one's agency (Rosen, 2012). However, it is not merely a case of the inherent attractiveness of the latter option that should prevail, where a rather naïve preference for the professional autonomy beyond all else is expected to solve the limitations of bureaucracy. However, as the 'truly' anarchic organization shows, a domination of bureaucracy unfolds in relying entirely upon professional autonomy and participation, as principles of voice (i.e., for each member the possibility to express one's voice in relation to organizational practices) become absurd in an overly bureaucratized translation of deliberate democracy into hours of meetings where every individual should have the possibility to express oneself and, in so doing, stifle decision-making processes in favor of individual expression (see, e.g., Graeber, 2013). Thus, bureaucracy carries an inherent absurdity as it proliferates the very problems it intends to solve.

In other words, if each individual is to be respected in their autonomy, a fair and consistent process is needed to ensure so. Another option, whereby individuals purely rely upon their own professional autonomy to make decisions, is also an impossible choice, as organizations are, by definition, spaces of and for collaboration. However, moving beyond the usual bureaucracy-autonomy paradox, which is a feature of modern organizations, as Kafka also showed a century ago, absurdity resides in the impossibility of the space in which a productive resolution can be found. Hence, the tragic nature of the impossible paradox stays perpetually close to the paradox itself, as shown by the real damage done within the space of the absurd paradox. The *inappropriate* nature of absurdity (see definition above) is not merely an inherent feature but more likely to be an understatement of the tragic potential underpinning absurdity, as the inappropriateness of social practices systematically undermines the dignity of individuals (see the example in the introduction of Chap. 1, where due to bureaucracy, a mother is prohibited to buy grocery shopping for her daughter on welfare benefits).

A second dimension relevant to the understanding of what absurdity is does not only refer to the coexistence of multiple, competing logics leading up to an impossible paradox, but the discrepancy between pretense and reality (Mintoff, 2008; Nagel, 1971). It is in this discrepancy that absurdity emerges. In light of our interest in absurd social practice, it is the discrepancy between public enunciation (i.e., public discourse; De Cleen et al., 2021) and everyday human reality that is of particular interest. Such discrepancy between enunciation and practice may also be understood as a (-n impossible) paradox: we witness the contradicting of a logic of public enunciation/propaganda for the status quo with the logic of actual manifestation or that what can be witnessed through the public eye. The earlier introduced Alexei Yurchak (2003, 2005), who studied the late decades of the Soviet Union, focused on the discrepancy between official, authoritative discourse (e.g., state propaganda, media, culture expression, and symbols) and the lived reality of citizens in the Soviet Union. This discrepancy manifested as absurdity, where ultimately logic was entirely absent (as famously shown in the Chernobyl disaster, where the first response by the authorities to cover up the explosion proved to be a case of an absence of logic that further descended into 'pure' absurdity). Another example concerns governmental (or multinational organizational) inertia towards climate change vis-à-vis the proclaimed commitment by governments (or multinational organizations), and the responses from both levels have become absurd. This absurdity manifests more and more as the widening gap between public discourse and reality, whereby discourse becomes more and more empty and meaningless, dissociated from a human reality, which is increasingly opposed to the discourse itself. For instance, oil giant Shell's investments in green energy constitute only a marginal fraction of their total revenues, and they fail to even meet their own green targets (The Guardian, 2020). Despite their proclaimed commitment, the discourse created by Shell renders itself meaningless, while discourse becomes absurd, acting only as PR stunts and being entirely disengaged from reality (see also Blühdorn, 2017; Brown, 2016). Absurdity also manifests itself through the growing gap between public enunciation and reality, through which public trust in politics, governance, and leadership is crumbling.

Authoritative discourse (hence discourse created by governments or dominant and elite groups in society; Yurchak, 2005) is by definition aimed at absolutism, or an all-encompassing vision on reality. Such discourse is always limited to the extent it can describe reality, and hence, there is a perpetual gap between discourse and reality. That which is considered to be 'real' can never be fully described by hegemonic discourse, and such a discrepancy only widens the discourse-reality gap over time. Nonetheless, the powerful appeal of authoritative discourse always has both symbolic and performative effects: even when authoritative discourse lacks the possibility of describing actual practices, it may always have an appealing effect on the individual and groups of people in proposing the ideal state. At the same time, it may also have performative effects, as appealing, persuasive authoritative discourse always entails the possibility of affecting actual social practices themselves, even when the gap itself remains intactly widened. It is also the absurdity of this perpetual gap in which meaning can be found (Davis, 2011). We will discuss this later in depth.

Finally, the question pertains why absurdity is perceived as such or why the gap between discourse and perceived practice in society and workplaces is perceived as absurd. In contrast, the relevant question here also pertains to why people (individually or as collectives) do *not* perceive social practices as absurd and why they are likely to take them for granted. One primary explanation refers to the inherent nature of absurd as against logic, or being illogical. Modern neoliberal-capitalist society is built on the principles of the Enlightenment, where rationality and the *homo economicus* are central (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Such dominant rational thought as the foundation for our contemporary society also stretches to the sciences, where society and workplaces are primarily understood through a rational perspective. While human behavior is widely understood as irrational, it is still conceived that human behavior in the workplace is expected to be conducted and thereby can be understood rationally. The absurd, however, violates this very principle and shows that (collective) human behavior is all but rational and to a greater extent driven by the illogical, the absurd. Hence, it is therefore needed to further unpack the nature and manifestation of absurdity.

Dimensions of the Absurd

How does the absurd manifest itself? While Camus describes the absurdity of life itself, the question pertains to how absurd social practice manifests and unfolds. First, absurdity manifests itself both individually and collectively. The earlier mentioned example by Nagel (1971) of one's pants falling down while being knighted refers to an individual case of absurdity, manifesting in terms of individual absurdity. While, as alluded to before, implications may be more widespread, it nonetheless refers to an individual case of absurdity. Yet, absurdity may also manifest collectively, as referred to earlier in the examples about bureaucracy, in which it is precisely *not only* the individual experience of absurdity that matters, but the collective manifestation, in which entire organizations or societies are hijacked by and thereby comport themselves in absurdity.

Secondly, absurdity can be *experienced* both individually and collectively. An individual may have a profound (Camusian) experience of absurdity, which nonetheless does not have to be shared by others—it may even create a situation of estrangement (Pfaller, 2012), where an individual suddenly perceives the absurdity of it all, which is then amplified by an empathic lack by others, who may not share the absurd experience. A process of hypernormalization is effective here, which we will discuss in greater extent later in this chapter. Individual experience of absurdity may create either wonder or amazement but also anxiety. This may be a moment where an individual suddenly sees the world 'as it really is,' in all its absurdity, creating a moment of mixed emotions in which the world is perceived differently. Yet, as absurdity of social practice is not limited to individual experience, but systemic, it would also be experienced collectively. In this case, absurdity refers to a shared experience among a group of individuals, in which recognition of a social practice as abnormal is central to societal functioning. It is here that a process of hypernormalization is likely to unfold, in which a social practice is taken for granted, normalized, and subsequently resistance to the hypernormalized state of affairs becomes delegitimized.

Foundations of Absurdity

Central to the understanding of absurdity is a gap, a void between either contradicting logics, the dissolution of logic itself, or the gap between rhetoric and reality. It is not a case of ‘solving’ this gap, through which absurdity would disappear. In contrast, individuals are continuously embedded within this gap, and it is in this gap that some meaning can be found. Yet, we are in need of greater understanding of what this gap actually means and signifies in unpacking absurdity. It implies a distinction between two opposites, two fundamentally dissociated ideas, that creates a situation of absurdity. What are these opposites? Graphically, we can start to understand the complexity of expressions around absurdity through its inherent comparison with the ‘normal’ or that which has become the norm. Society is organized and structured around a sense of normality, including the countless norms that make up society. This provides a first insight into the discovery of absurdity. When Camus argues that life itself is absurd, it is also that this absurdity is perpetually concealed. Camus unmasked this absurdity, indicating that the absurdity was not readily visible, but normalized. As Camus argued, people live their lives and act as if their lives are inherently meaningful (i.e., deprived of the absurd). It is therefore understood that the absurd nature is hidden, not readily visible to the ignorant individual. Hence, this means that absurdity is both *within* and *external* to normality. On the one hand, absurdity exists *within* normality, as the notion of normality constitutes an impossible paradox in itself. This paradox of normality reveals that normality itself is constructed and that absurdity always resides within notions of normality. On the other hand, absurdity is also *external* to normality, when logic dissolves itself and when the impotence of normality is fully revealed when everything else disintegrates. Nonetheless, it remains important to distinguish among the various terms to be used in theorizing upon absurdity and hypernormalization. This can be done through discussing the normal, the abnormal, absurdity, and the hypernormal.

The 'Normal'

Every deviation (absurd, abnormal, hypernormal) is considered in relation to a particular norm that has been developed over time, partly emerged spontaneously, and strengthened over time (Leyerzapf et al., 2018; May & Finch, 2009). It is worthwhile to study this norm, as our interest is into the deviation of the norm. Restricting our analysis to the Western world, it can be stated that the dominant idea of the 'normal' refers to a Western, liberal, middle-class experience of privilege. This projected normal is wide-reaching and encompasses most of the historical developments of the last 40–50 years in the Western world. For instance, the notion of the End of History by Fukuyama entailed the belief that societies globally were likely to move towards a form of liberal democracy as the 'final form of human government.' The notion of liberal democracy seemed to be the evolutionary dominant form to which societies would evolve. Notwithstanding the limitation of the argument itself (e.g., the rise of authoritarian populism as the other side of the coin of neoliberal democracy), it projected a norm of what could be considered civilized, appropriate, and best for humankind. It thereby denied the inherent absurdity of life itself, but instead actively contributed to a notion of normality. It is still very much the case that in many Western countries, liberal democratic political parties project themselves as the voice of reason, sometimes even voiced as the possibility of an a-political, technocratic government that would enact the liberal democratic ideal of individual liberty (Nandy, 2019; Pappas, 2019). In this, there is a strong push for a sense of normality, one which should be perceived as the norm, of how it *should* be. While such ideas are meanwhile exposed as fantasies (e.g., Petersen, 2007; Su, 2015), they still function as structuring society and the grand challenges of today. In a neoliberal democratic normality, people are supposed to be in control of themselves and of society. Consequently, societal issues can be controlled and solved through liberal decision-making. For instance, climate change is still widely perceived as something that can be monitored, controlled, and remediated through technological fixes (e.g., through reducing carbon emissions or through offsetting carbon footprint). Accordingly, work in a liberal democratic

normality is projected to offer stability and security, is supported by the government, and is subject to moderate taxation in order to ensure smooth and efficient functioning of society. It is this projected image of normality, of the neoliberal-capitalist lifestyle, that has become a global ideal, spread across the world, where countries and individuals are profoundly influenced (neo-colonially) of this idea of desired normality, a consumerist lifestyle, which can be effectively combined with concern for the planet (e.g., vegan diets as lifestyle choice), while absurdity can be disavowed as it is perpetually concealed when people are caught up in notions of normality.

However, normality is unlike a natural state and has to be continuously crafted and socially and relationally confirmed and is in perpetual danger of contestation. Normality is constructed, and therefore the cracks in normality shed light upon the abnormal features in society. It is well established that people have a preference for normality, order, and symmetry (Bertamini & Makin, 2014; Huang et al., 2018). Hence, deviations from normality are often perceived to be anxiety arousing, something that warrants special attention from the individual. It is therefore not surprising to observe that a mechanism to withstand abnormality becomes internalized, a process of automatic blocking of the deviation from normality. This may unfold at different levels and stages. For instance, in encountering a deviation from normality, one can either look away, ignore the very abnormal, or use attribution techniques to prevent the abnormal from getting too close to the individual. As an example, in encountering a begging homeless person, an individual can literally look the other way, move away from the homeless person, or give the homeless person some money. In the latter case, the abnormality (i.e., the deviation from the liberal democratic belief in the security of one's life and basic needs) can be disavowed through blaming the homeless person for their predicament; the result of having become homeless is attributed to the failure of the individual to ensure one's own survival (Bal et al., 2021; Bal & Dóci, 2018). Meanwhile, normality can be retained through absurdity by disavowing the structural elements *within* liberal democracy that has caused the rise of homelessness, poverty, and inequality. Therefore, a possible conclusion that it is the very structures of society that cause the rise of homelessness is not even appearing in the automatic response to blame

individuals for their predicament. Such strength has the notion of normality that any observed deviation can be reasoned away in favor of maintenance of the status quo of the structure and manifestation of normality.

The Abnormal

Nonetheless, the 'discovery' of a social practice as being abnormal opens up the possibility for the problematization of the concept of normality. Therefore, abnormal exists in the space between normal, absurd, and hypernormal and indicates the gap or the void that cannot be easily reached or grasped. It is here that an individual is confronted with the complexity of existence and thus the notion that the abnormal inherently exists within and outside the normal: it is only because of the abnormal that the normal can exist. Normality, therefore, exists by virtue of setting a norm, to differentiate between what is right and what is acceptable within the constraints of normality while, at the same time, *excluding* that what is considered to be abnormal, or deviating from the norm. Normality and abnormality also foreground the concept of authenticity. With the notion of normality, in particular when such normalization is projected through hegemonic forces in society, there is an implicit understanding of an authentic core that makes up a group of people jointly identifying (e.g., as a nation, a people, or a race). Any kind of abnormality is not only a deviation from the norm, of what one should be, but also a deviation from authenticity, from what is considered to be the root of one's existence, some kind of unspoiled, universal being. For instance, racism, xenophobia, othering, and scapegoating all function through the creation of an in- and outgroup, the first one constituting the essence of normality and a myth of authenticity and the latter highlighting that what is not. This assumed sense of authenticity also functions as a mythologized inner core of a group of people that defines the essence of their group belongingness. For instance, during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many Ukrainian refugees were welcomed by European countries, and people were offering spare rooms in their houses to accommodate (White) Ukrainian refugees. It was noted here how these

Ukrainian refugees were regarded as ‘one of us, Europeans,’ and a much less welcoming attitude was present towards Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, and African refugees in the preceding decade, especially visible through Western media coverage. The primarily White population of Ukraine was considered part of the European authentic population (the in-group) and thus treated with human dignity, while this dignity was not bestowed upon the non-White refugees (including non-White refugees from Ukraine—the outgroup). Hence, a notion of authenticity may underpin what and who are considered ‘normal’ and turn into a myth of the authentic people. Authenticity also indicates an internalized normalization within the individual, or a notion of an authentic core within the individual that makes up the person itself, defining who the person really is. It assumes a basis on which the individual stands in the world and is something that can be returned to if an individual feels lost, alienated, or is treated with less dignity.

Much less considered, however, is the possibility of the absence of authenticity and thus the need both for groups and individuals within society to define an authentic core through exclusionary terms or through what a group or an individual is *not*. As with the Ukrainian example, it is not so much that there is a proper European authentic self or identity, but it becomes ‘authentic’ through the negative affirmation: to be European is *not* to be from the Middle-East, Africa, or Asia. This normalizes a welcoming attitude towards the Ukrainian refugees, while only months previously, there was never such an attitude towards Afghani people who had risked their lives in collaborating with allied forces in Afghanistan and who were forced to flee when the Taliban seized power when the American army retreated. In sum, normality is a constructed entity, often linked with an assumption anchoring in a notion of authenticity, but also becoming an imposed normative by a dominant in-group in its projected structuring of social practices into a particular order of what is considered normal versus abnormal.

While abnormal could be considered a deviation from normality, a social practice that is absurd differentiates from normality in the dimensions described before. Absurdity differentiates from normality in exposing its (i) tragic and dangerous nature; (ii) its illogical, inappropriate, and awkward nature; and (iii) gap between pretense and reality. Hence, while

abnormal refers to any deviation from normality, the absurd exposes itself through the combination of these factors. Absurdity also differentiates itself from abnormality, such that it actively transforms a notion of normality itself. While the abnormal could be considered a mirror image of normality, showing its functioning as normalizing that what ought to be differentiated from its exclusionary opposite, the absurd functions more as a magnifying lens, interrogating not just normality generally, but through highlighting the void within normality, the gap that was always present in normality itself. The mirror image of absurdity is therefore not normality, but the hypernormal.

The Hypernormal

The hypernormal reflects the exposure of absurdity and refers to that what is continuously concealed and taken for granted. Therefore, absurdity exposes the inherent emptiness of normality itself (which is ideologically interpreted and ‘filled’; Bal et al., 2021). For instance, absurdity shows the emptiness of a European identity and therefore moves beyond the normal-abnormal distinction (e.g., European-non-European to distinguish between refugees who are welcome and not) into the interrogation of normality itself, exposing the inherent meaningfulness of normality. It is then here that we can start to observe the hypernormal: this arises as a social practice that is not merely normalized as part of social functioning, but when such social practice has become absurd and is concealed and hidden. The hypernormal is in continuous development, change, and fluctuation, through which it is better to speak to hypernormalization as a process rather than a more static hypernormal entity. The hypernormal refers to the covering up of meaningfulness or maleficent, exclusionary intent of normalization processes. The hyper refers to the intensification of the process of normalization, whereby an invisible threshold is passed by a dominant/hegemonic group and whereby normalization disintegrates into absurdity. For instance, while the welcoming and hospitable attitude towards Ukrainian refugees could be perceived as an appropriate and proper way to engage, it also amplified the underlying hypernormal—it was precisely this attitude that had been lacking for

many years when only non-European refugees knocked on the doors of Europe after having taken unimaginable risks to get there. This also aggravated the undignified treatment of non-European refugees in exemplifying the existence of alternative modes of opening up towards the rest of the world. The hypernormal also manifested when, during the Ukrainian war, television news and talk shows are crowded with military experts and military historians who spoke in depth about the Russian military strategy and progress, thereby too often implicitly speaking about the ‘war games’ (e.g., the proposed lack of rationality in Putin’s strategic decision-making about the war), projecting the enormous human suffering as a by-product of war, rather than the ethically only justifiable topic of discussion. Any kind of debate about military strategy could only be structured around the human suffering if not existing as a hypernormality. In this case, the Russian invasion into Ukraine represented a pure act of absurdity, where logic had dissolved altogether (but quickly transcending absurdity through the enormous suffering of the Ukrainian people). Even though some parts of the invasion could be linked to military strategy textbooks, this did not exclude in any way the rather absurd nature of the invasion itself.

What Absurdity Is Not

To be able to have a meaningful contribution of the analysis of absurdity to the literatures in organization studies and work psychology, it is necessary to differentiate absurdity from related, existing concepts. Perhaps most directly related to the concept of absurdity is *paradox* or contradiction (Lewis, 2000; Putnam et al., 2016). It was Lewis (2000) who defined paradox as ‘elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd when appearing simultaneously.’ Is absurdity nothing more than paradox, which is a rather fashionable concept in contemporary organization studies (Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016)? As alluded to previously, absurdity extends *beyond* paradox, and therefore, in contrast to Lewis (2000), we do not maintain that every paradox is absurd. In support, it is notable how in subsequent work, it is not unanimously agreed upon that every paradox is absurd; while Schad et al. (2016) do not refer explicitly

to the absurdity of paradox, it is still present in Putnam et al.'s (2016) work (both papers appearing in the same issue of *Academy of Management Annals*). While paradoxes may be absurd or have absurd outcomes (Putnam et al., 2016), they are not by definition absurd. For instance, the overview on the manifestations and variations of paradoxes by Schad et al. (2016) presents a range of paradoxes, many of which are not necessarily absurd, such as a 'learning paradox' or the notion that new knowledge cannot be generated from old knowledge, otherwise it would not be new. While it is possible to locate absurdities within such paradoxes, it may also be too restrictive to assume paradoxes to merely exist within the space of absurdity (i.e., being illogical, inappropriate, indicated through a gap between rhetoric and reality, and in the context of this book, being tragic and dangerous). Earlier, we have refined the relationship between absurdity and paradox through establishing that absurdity arises from the *impossible* paradox, that is, where it is not merely about two or more reasonable logics creating contradiction and tension when joined together, but where logic dissolves altogether, and where none of the separate logics seems to be placed within a frame of rationality. Hence, absurdity always exists *beyond* paradox; it always transcends it into a deeper layer of human's existence in this world.

Absurdity is also not stupid (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Paulsen, 2017). For some years, a strand of literature has emerged around functional stupidity in organizations. While stupidity is described as the inability or unwillingness of people to mobilize their cognitive resources and intelligence, it touches upon the non-rational nature of absurdity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Stupidity refers to a situation where people refrain from reflection, justification, or 'substantive reasoning,' and its conceptualization is heavily based upon a judgment of a situation or a person as not *smart*, but stupid. While stupidity does neither engage with the level of appropriateness or ethics as much as absurdity does (e.g., Alvesson and Spicer (2012) ignore the question of stupidity in the context of ethics), nor does it engage with the gap between rhetoric and reality, it therefore speaks of a fundamentally different concept as absurdity (if it speaks about a meaningful concept anyway). Moreover, the term and description of stupidity assumes non-rationality to be stupid, which is rather uninformative both theoretically and conceptually. Using the concept of

stupidity assumes being ‘smart’ as the desirable opposite (Alvesson and Spicer use ‘smart’ 24 times in their 2012 seminar paper on stupidity, posing stupidity as the ‘other side to smartness,’ p. 1198). Absurdity, however, elucidates the limitation of such approach by showing that there is no desirable opposite that creates order, efficiency, and optimal functioning—instead absurdity highlights the importance of acknowledging the impossible paradox—there is simply no ‘smart’ alternative that could be located as the opposite of absurdity and which would remedy the tragic consequences of absurdity itself.

Moreover, recently, a strand of literature has emerged around the concept of bullshit management, bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2020; Spicer, 2013), and nonsense (Tourish, 2020). All of such terms refer to the meaninglessness of contemporary practices in society, organizational life, and academia. Such empty practices are indicative of our time and refer to a rather vulgar description of what is happening in society and workplaces (not coincidentally coined by privileged White men in a provocative mood). It is also related to the rise of the ‘post-truth era,’ in which fake news thrives and has become part not just of society and public discourse, but as a tool for power. For instance, the deliberate strategy by Russia to feed the world a wide variety of fake news, propaganda, and mixed messages not only confuses the public, but is also an effective tool home and abroad to gather support for the invading leaders. These terms refer to a disinterest in truth and as such could be understood as absurdities of our contemporary era. However, it is also important to emphasize that while fake news and bullshit practices belong to the space of absurdity, of impossible paradoxes (e.g., against the Russian fake news propaganda, it is *not* just a matter of relying upon free Western media), it is also important to acknowledge the lack of ‘reasonable alternative’—against fake news, there is no ‘factual news’ that is believable and should be preferred above the fake news/conspiracy theory. While on the one hand, fake news is nothing new and has always been existing and strategically used by states, governments, and companies, on the other hand, the opposition fake news-truth is unhelpful as the dominant emphasis in many (Western) countries on ‘the truth’ ignores the multiple existing truths there are (but not in a post-modern sense that all truths are equal), and therefore, an absurdity lens helps to overcome such limited binary distinction. If fake news has become absurd, it is more appropriate

to locate an escape out of this post-truth era through a radical alternative (Žižek, 2009), rather than merely proposing the opposite of fake news (a Western hegemonic, neoliberal version of the truth) as a globally generalizable solution. For instance, McCarthy et al. (2020) propose ‘critical thinking’ as a way of dealing with workplace bullshit. However, is it not precisely the case that conspiracy thinkers start as critical thinkers, reflecting critically on societal practices, before starting to see patterns among events and practices that lead up to potentially absurd conspiracy theories? It is unlikely to maintain that critical thinking works as a panacea against fake news, while it may actually be an important indicator for the rise of such. It is, however, interesting how according to Tourish (2020), academia and management research has also been penetrated by nonsense, with a dominance of ‘bombastic style, starved of metaphor, wit or irony’ (p. 101). The phenomenon seems to be more commonplace than assumed and also present in academic research. It remains interesting to analyze how absurdity has also manifested in academia and academic research, and Tourish (2020) presents some interesting examples of studies that are meaningless.

Finally, absurdity also touches upon concepts such as alienation (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021) and strange capitalism (Cederström & Fleming, 2012). While alienation or the feeling of estrangement may result from the lack of control over the mean of production in Marxist terminology, it also involves a lack of meaning, exploitation, and a fragmented sense of identity and social relationships (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021). However, alienation may be the *result* of experienced absurdity at work, while alienation as such is not an absurd experience itself—in contrast, feelings of alienation are both traumatic and instrumental as they inform an individual of the necessity of action, as they signify exploitation, discomfort, and lack of meaning in one’s life and work. This may also be related to the experience of strange capitalism or the inherent estranging effects of capitalism in its exploitative nature. These concepts are therefore helpful in identifying the links between absurdity of social practices with the socio-political-economic structures surrounding these practices. On the one hand, absurdity could be better understood when these structures are taken into account (e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018), while on the other hand, absurdity is also unfolding because of the political-economic structures and the inherently estranging nature of capitalism.

Absurdity Normalized: Introducing Hypernormalization

Absurdity of social practices are by nature tragic *and* posing danger to existing structures. Absurdity is always threatening, as it tends to undermine that what may seem the fabric of society that which holds it all together. Absurdity creates a feeling of discomfort, or being out of one's comfort zone, of uncertainty how to feel and act. Absurd art and humor are, as alluded to previously, inherently dangerous, as they expose that what is perpetually concealed. With a smile, a deeply traumatic social practice may be revealed in a piece of absurd humor. It is therefore not surprising to observe how absurdity *has* to be concealed, normalized, and taken for granted. Normalization is therefore inherently connected to absurdity.

Starkey et al. (2019) argue that the absurd is an invitation to find meaning in a world with no sense. Hence, it is about a process of finding meaning in the absurd (*cf.* Esslin, 1960). This is imperative as the absurd also indicates the dissolution of the rational human being and rational structures. Hence, the absurd stands in contrast to the notion of 'ontological security' or the necessity of people to see themselves as one and undivided (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological security offers stability, identity, and a sense of security, which can be threatened by absurdity. It is therefore that absurdity evokes a process of normalization; through this, the absurd can be regarded as taken for granted, as neutral in itself. We refer to this process as hypernormalization (Yurchak, 2003, 2005).

Theoretical Background of Hypernormalization

Hypernormalization was coined by the Russian-born anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2003, 2005). Yurchak investigated the paradoxes in Soviet society that contributed to the sudden collapse of the Soviet system in the late 1980s (Yurchak, 2003, 2005) and in particular the paradox of eternity and stagnation which was central to life in the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the Soviet Union seemed to exhibit eternal

existence, while on the other hand, quality of life and the system itself were stagnating. The death of Stalin in 1953 created a discursive vacuum, as no longer the supreme Master lived who could authorize public discourse. In response, the ruling elite decided to stick to the authoritative discourse allowed during the Stalin era. Consequently, ideological representations (such as media expressions, rituals, and formal structures) were perfectly replicated over time (Yurchak, 2003), such that they became heteronyms or context-independent. For instance, the writing of the articles for the newspaper *Pravda* involved a very close monitoring and hyperfocus on reproducing the discourse as allowed under Stalin (Yurchak, 2005). The effect of this ideological reproduction of texts and cultural symbols was that their literal meaning became increasingly dissociated from their 'real' constative meaning. This reproduction of form became the way Soviet society and practices were maintained by the rulers, and as such ideological enunciations represented 'objective truths' (Yurchak, 2005, p. 10). However, these ideological texts and symbols became an end in themselves and increasingly 'frozen' (Yurchak, 2005, p. 26).

The rising discrepancy between authoritative discourse and really existing practices led to a hypernormalization of language: texts and symbols became absurd in their inability to describe social reality, but were yet treated as entirely 'normal' in society. Moreover, as ideological enunciation was incapable to describe social reality, it became separated from ideological rule (Yurchak, 2005). In other words, the post-Stalin Soviet regime was constantly dealing with the crisis of legitimacy, as ideological representations (e.g., liberation of the individual, critical thinking) were dissociated from everyday experience under ideological rule of the state. Yet, this hypernormalization of language and cultural symbols provided uniformity and predictability, hence engendering ontological security for state and citizens (Croft, 2012; Mitzen, 2006). Ontological security refers to 'the need to experience oneself as a whole [...] in order to realize a sense of agency' (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342) and thereby provides stability, identity, and a sense of oneself, which was imperative in the uncertain times of the Soviet system. Yet, this clinging on to ontological security in the face of hypernormalization also created a new vacuum of meaning, in which language could never be understood properly and always entailed

a multitude of possible constative meanings for people, its ambiguity serving to maintain the status quo.

As any deviation from the existing permitted discourse could potentially form a threat to the system, it became frozen and fixed to what Stalin had approved of during his reign. However, while reality developed, this frozen discourse became less and less able to capture and regulate reality and what happened in society. This spurred absurdist effects, whereby official discourse became more and more detached from reality and whereby individuals had to find pragmatic ways to deal with this gap (i.e., understand that official discourse was not to be taken literally and that underneath it, unwritten rules dictated how social practice was regulated). Yet, this frozen discourse provided the ruling elites almost 40 years (a perception) of control over their gigantic Soviet empire ('until it was no more'; Yurchak, 2005).

To survive in the post-Stalin Soviet Union, an individual needed a level of pragmatism to be able to understand the performative nature of ideological messages and the space which was open for a variation of constative meanings of ideology. Yurchak's research (2003, 2005) shows that a binary split between public ideological display and private beliefs was too simplistic. In reality, people were continuously intertwined and were both engaged in the performative and constative dimension of ideology. Hence, on the one hand, people were forced to engage in the Soviet performative rituals, such as attending Party meetings and playing one's role in such meetings. On the other hand, they had to also interpret such authoritative discourse in a constructive manner and not take it *too* literal, but find a way through which discourse could be translated into the practice of everyday life in the Soviet Union. However, this does not mean that people privately disengaged from Communist ideals while being involved in the performative dimension of the reproduction of form. In contrast, because ideological enunciation became increasingly empty (Žižek, 1989), it also opened up the space for new meanings. Hence, individuals were actively looking for creative reinterpretation of Communist ideals (such as liberation, social welfare, and collectivity of belonging) into new meanings that were 'not limited to the constative meanings of authoritative discourse' (Yurchak, 2005, p. 115). This often involved an explicit un-anchoring of the constative dimension of

authoritative discourse while filling this with new bottom-up generated meanings. Thereby, people often maintained their beliefs, and they found a pragmatic way of translating ideological language to everyday contexts (Yurchak, 2003).

Hypernormalization in Contemporary Society

It has been argued that hypernormalization was not just a feature of the Soviet Union but is also manifested in contemporary society (Bal, 2017; Nicholls, 2017). Recently, the term has been popularized through the documentary *HyperNormalisation* by Adam Curtis (2016; Bal, 2017; Nicholls, 2017), in which the argument is put forth that in the post-political present, public opinion is manipulated to believe that politics today is normal and that there is no alternative, through which 'the public' is able to accept absurdities of the contemporary world (Nicholls, 2017). Hence, the documentary forms the bridge between contemporary understanding and conceptualization of hypernormalization and the original use of the term by Yurchak. However, as noted by Nicholls (2017), the documentary also makes the mistake of perpetuating the binary split between public display and private beliefs, the very object that Yurchak's work criticizes.

Nonetheless, there are important parallels between hypernormalization in the Soviet Union and contemporary society. While authoritative discourse in Western society is not top-down controlled to the extent as was the case in the Soviet Union, we can observe a similar process. Absurdities of contemporary society, such as bureaucracy, inequalities, othering, and racism, are also subject to an ever-increasing discrepancy between public discourse and actual manifestation. Presently, we can observe how this increasing discrepancy becomes more and more absurd (e.g., the absurdity of eight men owning as much wealth as the poorest half of the global population; Oxfam Novib, 2022). It also takes more and more psychological energy for individuals to cope with this discrepancy and manage their reality. It is therefore that the legitimacy of discourse is crumbling, through which the absurd can be recognized and problematized. A prominent difference between the Soviet Union and

present Western society which should be acknowledged is the freedom of expression, through which it is possible to problematize existing absurdities of our society. However, it is also shown that this is insufficient to actually elicit social change, and more is needed to change social circumstances.

We argue that absurdity in Western society is also perpetually hypernormalized, even when the dysfunctional features of absurdity become more and more visible at the level of public discourse. Hence, hypernormalization has inherent dynamic capability to shape itself aligning with public discourse. While hypernormalization of languages served to maintain ideological rule in the Soviet Union, in contemporary society, this hypernormalization serves a similar maintenance of the status quo and a delegitimization of radical change (Bal & Brookes, 2022). Such hypernormalization manifests as the invisibility of and the de-problematization of absurdity in society: on the one hand, absurdity remains invisible in the taken-for-granted nature of existing societal structures and practices. On the other hand, in the face of appearing absurdities (e.g., staggering income inequalities, environmental collapse), serious-looking politicians are able to project such absurdities as technical problems that can be fixed and controlled. The notion of business leaders or politicians being no longer in control represents the surfacing of absurdity to the level of public discourse, and it is unsurprising to rarely witness such events—in the explosive potential of unmasking absurdity, it is not surprising to observe hegemonic actors in society trying to persuade a public image of being in control, not allowing oneself to be hijacked by absurdity. To do so requires a process of perpetual hypernormalization, of keeping hidden that what cannot be revealed.

Hypernormalization Moves Beyond Normalization

There is well-established literature on normalization in organizational settings. This literature is informative for our understanding of hypernormalization, and our conceptualization moves significantly beyond the more trite observations underpinning normalization. While normalization theory assumes a process of institutionalization of social practices, it

hardly engages with the term itself and in particularly the 'norm' that is so crucially part of normalization. While there are certainly functional elements in normalization of practices and rituals for stability and predictability, we also observe a blurring of the distinction between normalization and hypernormalization. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to assess whether a practice is normalized as a result of democratic, consensus-based approaches or whether it is hypernormalized through hegemonic actors influencing public discourse or internalized through ideological fantasy. Hence, normalization may always carry the potential of hypernormalization, in its inability to engage with the concept of normality itself.

Yet, hypernormalization is different from normalization (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002; Ashforth et al., 2007; May and Finch, 2009). Normalization can be defined as the 'institutionalized processes by which extraordinary situations are rendered seemingly ordinary' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002, p. 215). Normalization occurs throughout social life and serves the purpose of adaptation to unfamiliar circumstances and making practices routine elements of everyday life (May & Finch, 2009). Normalization of practices and rituals may boost predictability and therefore perceptions of a practice being accepted and not problematic. Yet, while normalization describes how social practices emerge and are adopted into widely accepted norms, they do not necessarily have to be illogical, inappropriate, or discrepant from proclamation. Moreover, while they share similarities with hypernormalization, and in certain cases may have positive effects for individuals and groups, they do not explain the absurdist underpinnings of hypernormalization.

Hypernormalization differentiates itself from normalization in two essential ways. First, where normalization may have positive effects for setting a norm that creates predictability of expected behaviors (May & Finch, 2009), hypernormalization creates a norm of the absurd becoming accepted into expected behavioral patterns. While there is no clear logical argument for maintenance of a certain practice, it can still be observed how a social practice that is absurd emerges and is maintained. In contrast to normalization, hypernormalization departs from the position of absurdity, whose emergence and maintenance transcend beyond rationality. It is also notable in normalization theory (May & Finch, 2009) how

the process of normalization is described as a primarily, or even purely, cognitive process that is guided through a (conceptual) model, in which coherent, meaningful qualities of social practices are perceived to spur a process of collective engagement, collective action, and reflective monitoring. It is striking how normalization in such models is proposed to unfold as a primarily rational process, in which the illogicality of practices is absent, as if only rational practices become normalized. Our current conceptualization of hypernormalization may respond to such lack in previous work.

Second, key to hypernormalization is the discrepancy between official or enunciated communication and reality, whereas this notion is absent in normalization conceptualizations. This discrepancy is central and opens up the way for interpretations of hypernormalization as ideological (see, e.g., Yurchak, 2005; Žižek, 2018). Hypernormalization is thus not about the institutionalization of rational practices, but about how the invisible order creates the possibility for the emergence of hypernormalized practices in society (Yurchak, 2005; Žižek, 1989, 2001). Another defining feature of hypernormalization vis-à-vis normalization is that the functionality of the latter in maintaining the status quo (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002) entails the possibility of a level of humaneness in protecting people through behavioral norms. Hypernormalization, however, is increasingly dissociated from being functional in protecting human beings. For instance, hypernormalization in the Soviet Union showed the slowly disintegration of society eventually leading to the Fall of Wall in 1989.

Effects of Hypernormalization

Hypernormalization fulfills multiple functions, such as predictability and stability in society even when its detrimental effects become increasingly clear (Žižek, 2018). For instance, while the hypernormalization and institutionalization of White supremacy in the USA (Shor, 2020) has deeply affected Black people's lives, it remains normalized as it offers stability to White citizens. It is important to understand the complexities and dynamics underpinning the normalization of the absurd in society as

it does not only play an essential part in the translation of ideology into practice; it also has various detrimental effects for individuals and society at large. It can be observed how absurdities (such as the Trump presidency in the USA) paved the way for a revival of misogyny and racism in society (Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018; Shor, 2020). Moreover, normalization of absurdity undermines democracy, the redistribution of power to the people, and the possibilities of a society that protects vulnerable people as well as the planet more widely (Bal, 2017). In other words, while absurdity produces systemic suffering of people and the planet, hypernormalization delegitimizes claims for the systemic causes of suffering. It is therefore needed to understand in depth how hypernormalization functions.

Dynamics of Hypernormalization at Collective Level

Hypernormalization refers to a process through which the absurd becomes normalized in society and in workplaces. Hypernormalized practices either emerge spontaneously in response to societal pressures or are orchestrated by powerful groups in search of dominance (Yurchak, 2003, 2005). Mostly, however, it is the combination of factors that explains the emergence of hypernormalization, whereby absurdity results as an initial by-product of societal action, which turns out to be functional in some way and is maintained in society. The motivation behind initiating hypernormalization may be a need for predictability and ontological security (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002; Mitzen, 2006), which is similar to what happens under normalization. Hypernormalization dynamics can be understood at both collective and individual levels, the first being discussed now and the individual in the subsequent chapter in which we will discuss the ideology and internalization behind hypernormalization.

Four mechanisms underpin the collective normalization of absurdity in society and workplaces: institutionalization, rationalization, creation of a lack of alternative (Bal, 2017; Nicholls, 2017), and socialization (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; May & Finch, 2009). Institutionalization, or

the routinization of practices (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; May & Finch, 2009), plays a key role in hypernormalization. When the absurd becomes embedded into daily practices and established as part of shared memory (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), it becomes institutionalized and becomes part of the normal behaviors which are expected of citizens. In this instance, collective memory projects expected norms upon individuals and legitimizes absurdity as 'how things are done.' When absurdity becomes routine, it is less likely to be questioned openly, through which it is further institutionalized into normative behavior. Routinizing also contributes to greater efficiency, as individuals have to devote less energy into questioning why and how they ought to behave. Moreover, people become desensitized after repeated exposure to absurdity, and their responses to the stimulus weaken, and ultimately individuals become mindless towards absurdity.

Furthermore, rationalization of absurdity occurs when social practices are perceived to be 'just how things are' and thus entirely normal. It effectively serves as a social construction aimed at neutralizing claims for contestation of a hypernormalized practice and its inherent ambiguities and, at the same time, making compliance with a practice or system desirable. Ashforth and Anand (2003) identified various types of rationalization, including legality (that a practice is not illegal), denial of individual or collective responsibility, and denial of injury or victimhood. Rationalization occurs primarily in the first stages of hypernormalization, where a practice or system is still questioned by in- or outsiders. Rationalization enables members to defend themselves and others to critique. While absurdity is about the irrational (Starkey et al., 2019), rationalization effectively functions as a masking of the unspoken, ideological underpinnings of absurd practice itself (Jost et al., 2017; Žižek, 1989). Rationalization is an important aspect, as it directly confronts with the possibility of absurdity-denial; through rationalization, hegemonic actors in society can portray practices as entirely normal, or merely enough, thereby effectively denying the very existence of absurdity or mitigating the seriousness of a practice. For instance, the discussion about and implementation of gender quota serve as an effective tool to deny the absurdity of gender inequalities in society. Through positioning the necessity of, for instance, 30% women on corporate boards, it is possible

to *both* deny the existence of the absurdity of gender inequality *and* portray effective action against gender inequalities while presenting it as a problem that can be solved through technical fixes (i.e., quota that can be monitored, assessed, implemented). The actual absurdity underlying the very need for quota to remedy gender inequality is obfuscated through the emphasis on the measures themselves and the discussion whether a certain percentage would be enough. Again, we find the notion that monitoring and controlling reality offer credible, technical, solutions to absurd problems in society.

Another important way through which absurdity is rationalized is through the creation of a lack of alternative (Bal, 2017). Absurdity becomes further normalized through the constitution of hegemonic belief in a lack of alternative (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017). Additionally, the very *aim* of hypernormalization is to create a lack of alternative (Bal, 2017). Hence, this lack also serves as the ultimate goal, through which absurdity is further strengthened. Central is the notion that individuals cease to imagine anything else than the current state of affairs. People may become desensitized to the 'rough edges' of absurdity, such as instances of racism and misogyny. Subsequently, a process unfolds whereby such practices are postulated as the 'new normal' and, thus, that such practices are merely part of everyday life. Compliance with such norms not only creates legitimacy of such practices, but also makes the individual more strongly tied to the system, thereby amplifying the lack of alternative. While the Soviet Union rulers feared the population to be seduced by Western freedom in capitalism, the lack of alternative seems much more pervasive in contemporary neoliberal society. It is in this very society that hypernormalization is even more strongly supported in the very lack of perceived alternative, the disillusionment in socialism and communism, and the lost notion of social democracy that created the very conditions for neoliberalism to flourish from the 1970s onwards.

Finally, socialization enables hypernormalization to become fully institutionalized over time (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). When newcomers (e.g., younger generations) are socialized (or enculturated) into perceiving absurdity as normal and expected, they may fail to acknowledge that a certain practice is 'absurd' through a lack of reflection or even develop favorable views of an absurd practice, either because it facilitates an

individuals' own attitudes and standing or because it appeals to an ideological belief in a system and becomes internalized (Jost et al., 2017). Socialization occurs in every context and allows societies and organizations to shift discourses over time. For instance, during the 1970–1980s Reagan presidency in the USA, the top tax bracket was 70%, whereas it is currently 35% in the USA (Vox, 2019). The enculturation shift in societal discourse to what can be considered 'normal' has also been referred to as the shifting Overton Window (Beck, 2010). The Overton Window identifies the discourse in society that can be considered normal and acceptable, and this 'window' can shift over time, as a result of (hyper-)normalization. Hence, while in the 1970s the top tax bracket was 70%, the Overton Window has changed during the last decades such that 35% is the 'new normal,' thereby facilitating the hypernormalization of income inequality (and increasingly low taxes for the rich). This has been made possible through the socialization of new generations into normalization of lower tax rates, and consequentially ever-rising income inequality, even though it is now widely established that income and associated forms of inequality are rising (Partington, 2019). Socialization into hypernormalization also influences newcomers' abilities and motivations to speak up against absurd practices, who will be more likely to be compliant. In conjunction with the notion of a lack of alternatives, hypernormalization becomes a seemingly perpetual state. This is also present in Yurchak's discussions (2003), where it was argued that the Soviet state 'was forever, until it was no more.' The perception of the 'eternal' Soviet Union was precisely based on the notion of the hypernormalization of the illogical through the acceptance of absurdity as the state of normality, thereby projecting the absurd as the ever-lasting standard which was supported through 'reproduction of form.' In the perpetual reproduction of ideological symbols (propaganda, newspapers, cultural symbols), absurdity was both normalized (i.e., the inherent meaninglessness of ideological symbols became invisible in their continuous reproduction, through which people were desensitized to their meaninglessness) and presenting itself at the front stage (i.e., with the rising gap between public discourse and actual manifestation, such ever-rising gap could not be concealed forever). Hence, hypernormalization is always only partially effective, as it is in continuous need of approval and reinforcement, which

are easier to achieve in authoritarian and hegemonic states (such as the Soviet Union) than in Western countries with freedom of press and free will. Nonetheless, an important aspect of hypernormalization concerns psychological internalization, a topic that we will address in depth in the subsequent chapter.

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3

Ideological Underpinnings of Absurdity and Hypernormalization

Introduction

Concepts of absurdity and hypernormalization are firmly rooted in the notion of a sense of ‘normality’ or a projected norm that informs what could be considered socially acceptable and that which deviates from this norm. This sense of normality is by definition grounded in fantasy, or a sub- or unconscious desire for structure and predictability (Žižek, 2006). If absurdity constitutes a deviation from perceived ‘normality,’ it is this sense of normality that functions as a fantasy that is violently disrupted through absurdity. Absurdity, therefore, plays multiple roles in establishing a counterpart towards normality, and more precisely, it plays a fundamental role in the process of hypernormalization. In this chapter, we will interrogate such roles, and in so doing, we will use an ideology lens to study absurdity and hypernormalization. As hypernormalization is about the process of taking for granted and normalizing that what is perceived to be absurd, it touches closely upon ideology and particular in relation to a Žižekian approach to ideology (Žižek, 1989, 2009, 2010, 2018; see also Seeck et al., 2020, for an overview of the different perspectives on and uses of ideology). We will therefore discuss absurdity and

hypernormalization through an ideological lens, in order to be able to formulate responses to the questions *why* absurdity is normalized, why people retain their belief in normality despite its inherent absurdist features, and thus why hypernormalization is maintained. For instance, when the gap between authoritative discourse and really existing practices in the Soviet Union became absurd, causing discourse to become more and more impotent in describing actual affairs in society, it did not mean that people massively disengaged from such discourse. Instead, Yurchak's (2005) research showed how people (at least partially) retained their belief in authoritative discourse and disavowed the absurdist nature of such discourse. Hence, the interplay between authoritative discourse and 'really existing practices' was more complex than manifesting purely as binary distinction. People continued to invest in the appealing nature of discourse, even though daily experience would contradict such discourse. It was also in the notion of 'everything was forever' (Yurchak, 2005) that a promise of a better future was contained, a promise that discourse would be materialized in a later time, while the present was a temporary struggle towards a better life in the future. To understand why this was the case, and why people retain their beliefs in hypernormalization, we introduce the concept of ideological fantasy to the study of absurdity and hypernormalization. We discuss how absurdity itself functions as a fantasy that people hold about the world and their own lives. Moreover, absurdity could also be understood as the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized (Žižek, 1989) or that what is also described as the Real in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. It is not surprising that absurdity may have tragic and dangerous potential, if functioning as either of these two possibilities. In the following chapter, we will discuss in greater depth these constellations of absurdity. Nonetheless, before doing so, we will first discuss the psychological analysis of absurdity.

A Psychology of the Absurd

Absurdity has not received much attention in psychology or management and usually has been referred to primarily in the context of absurdist literature, such as the work of Franz Kafka, Leonora Carrington, and

Fernando Pessoa or philosophers such as Albert Camus and Søren Kierkegaard. However, psychologists have thus far refrained to engage directly with the role of absurdity in the psychology of the human being and thus how absurdity informs the psyche (i.e., the mind or soul) of people and their behavior. While so far we have discussed the roles of predictability and need for stability (see also Proulx et al., 2010) as a result of being confronted with absurdity, such perspectives are dominated by the assessment of absurdity as threatening and *de*-stabilizing. However, absurdity should also be perceived in a different light, whereby absurdity and its normalization are not merely a threat to the individual's need for stability and predictability, but whereby a process of sensemaking may unfold which deviates from an understanding of absurdity as fantasy. However, such sensemaking processes may unfold primarily as deviations from the dominant response we can observe to the confrontation with absurdity. Hence, it will be necessary first to discuss such dominant responses, after which we will take a look at the divergent responses to absurdity, such as embracing absurdity (Camus, 1942).

The experience of absurdity is neither purely within the person nor is it purely in the world outside the person, but always in the exchange between a person and the world (Camus, 1942). While Camusian philosophy argues that the meaninglessness of life in the face of the inevitability of death leads to a profound absurd experience, it is not merely the case that absurd life experiences are by definition related to the meaninglessness of life. Extending the understanding of absurdity to a broader experience, it is true that people are continuously confronted with absurdities of contemporary life and society. It is in our current time almost impossible for individuals in (Western) society to dissociate oneself from the absurdities penetrating daily existence. For instance, the rise of income inequality has become absurd. While inequality has been addressed in academic circles for decades, it was the publication of Piketty (2013), and to a lesser extent the work of Stiglitz (2012) and others, that raised global attention to the issue of inequality, which became a topic that has been widely debated in popular media. With the report of Oxfam Novib (2022) showing that eight men own as much as the poorest half of the global population, it can be ascertained that wealth inequality has become properly absurd. Such absurdities define the contemporary era

and confront the individual with a society in which there is fundamentally an incongruence between the notion of ‘civilization’ and the actual manifestations of neoliberal-capitalist society. It is in this vein that comparisons can be made with the late Soviet Union, where public discourse became increasingly detached from actual practice and ideological rule. Along the same lines, the individual in contemporary Western society is also confronted with the discrepancy between the promise of civilized, capitalist society (e.g., the so-called capitalism with a human face which was the inherent promise of liberal democracy, Žižek, 2018) and the crumbling of certainties within this civilization (e.g., the growing lack of affordable housing, reliable public transport, and an income safety net). While the economic crisis of 2007–2008 profoundly influenced wealth and real income for many people negatively, it did not cause a fundamental rupture within Western society: the status quo remained, and there was never any proper attempt to redefine the structures of society, in a way that not only a next crisis would be prevented, but also in a way that redistributive justice would prevail. It was therefore not surprising to observe that 15 years later, the core structures of Western society have remained intact, leading to an ever-increasing absurd society. It can still be observed how grand absurdities remain unchallenged, including inequalities, climate change, racism, populism, and the decline of democracy (Bal, 2017; Brown, 2019). For the individual, these absurdities are all-surrounding and omnipresent, defining our contemporary experience of life.

Yet, at the same time, the modern individual is also capable of leading one’s life without the constant awareness of the inherent absurdity of life and the world. Most individuals live their lives, go to work, commute, eat, and sleep, without wondering about the meaning of their lives. For instance, verbal communication between people is grounded on the acceptance and reliance of a set of complex rules (Žižek, 2006). Many of these rules are followed blindly, without being aware of them, and it is only upon conscious reflection that one is becoming aware of *some* of these rules. However, there are also many rules that dictate interpersonal behavior and relationships which are unconscious or belong to a more obscene or traumatic space and are more hidden in order to keep up appearance (Žižek, 2006, p. 9). Hence, when people interact with and

interrelate to others, their speech and behavior are guided through implicit norms, many of which they are not conscious of. When absurdity belongs primarily to that unconscious or traumatic domain, it is not surprising that most people live their lives without the conscious awareness of the absurdity of it all. Absurdity, therefore, belongs to the Lacanian Symbolic level, closely linked to the notion of the big Other, or the 'point of reference that provides the ultimate horizon of meaning' (Žižek, 2006, p. 10). Through the existence of a big Other, structure and sensemaking is provided, through which the current status quo can be accepted more easily, while absurdity disavowed, as exposing it would also displease the big Other. The Symbolic order, or that what constitutes public discourse in its widest sense, already contains many absurdities which are hyper-normalized to be merely taken for granted.

According to Camus (1942; Bakewell, 2016), it is only when a breakdown occurs that people start to ask themselves what the meaning of life entails, and when they may become aware of the absurdity surrounding them, as something being inherent to contemporary existence. It is in such a collapse that a moment of clarity may unfold, one where one is able to see clearly the absurdity of it all. However, it is also questionable to what extent such moments actually take place in an individual's life, how profound these moments truly are, and whether they have lasting impact on the individual. For instance, while the COVID-19 pandemic affected the world as a whole in 2020 onwards, it is also remarkable how despite claims of a 'new normal' (e.g., social distancing during the pandemic, the wearing of face masks, but *also* a revaluing of nature and non-capitalist lifestyles), a speedy return to the 'old normal' could be witnessed in those countries where vaccination campaigns controlled the spread of the virus. While many writings had appeared that called for a fundamental rethinking of the economy and society in a post-COVID world, it was also striking how quickly people returned to their old lifestyles (e.g., flying to holiday destinations and maintaining their consumerist lives spending on high streets or online). Ironically, work psychologists and organizational scholars have seemed to be primarily obsessed with the issue of working from home during and after the pandemic, and their visions of a 'new normal' have referred mainly to the possibility for office-based work to be conducted from home. Hence, it is likely that the

Camusian moment of clarity is a rather rare event, or even more so, an event which can be actively disavowed. In Lacanian theory, it is hysteria that emerges when an individual starts to question one's discomfort in the symbolic identity, or the crumbling of certainty and meaning in the face of the absurd nature of social practice. Absurdity, therefore, is not surprisingly usually concealed, hidden, and perhaps harder to detect than initially theorized. If absurdity awareness may lead to hysteria, it is not surprising that individuals may deploy a range of defense mechanisms in order to avoid being exposed to an experience of absurdity. The example from the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore informative: while this pandemic constituted a rather monumental experience of disruption of daily life, a disruption of all certainties built in neoliberal-capitalist society (i.e., the possibility of work, consumption, and free movement), it is also striking how even though this pandemic should be perceived as a global traumatic event, it disappeared in lieu of a rather old notion of normality when restrictions were lifted across Western countries. The tenacity of neoliberal-capitalist lifestyles trumps even the greatest disruptions to daily life. In other words, the defense mechanisms employed include not only a deliberate disavowal of the existence of absurdity, but also a hyper-normalization of absurdity. Such hypernormalization would reason that while pandemics are unfortunate, they are part of history and therefore constitute only temporary glitches in the course of (ongoing) societal progress. People generally indicated that they wanted to 'get on with their lives' when restrictions were lifted. Similar beliefs in (eternal) societal progress (see, e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018) also include perceptions that the world is moving towards a carbon-zero society, whereby the current fossil-fuel economy can smoothly be transitioned into an entire renewable energy society.

Hence, if we are to postulate a psychology of absurdity, it should engage first of all with the question why absurdity is absent, not only in the psychological literature, but more profoundly in the notion of absence from individual awareness. It is here that we propose two explanations, both based on the work of Žižek (1989, 2001, 2009), and in particular the notion of ideological fantasy. As argued above, absurdity may function as a fantasy itself, but it may also function as the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized (i.e., the Real or the void in Lacanian theory).

First, absurdity may function as fantasy itself, and in particular a fantasy of normality, which is then disavowed. In this meaning, absurdity belongs to the space of the Lacanian Symbolic, which is closely related to the Lacanian Imaginary, which is also the domain of fantasy (with the triad Symbolic-Imaginary-Real constituting the building blocks of human existence in Lacanian theory). The Symbolic order refers to the symbolic structures of and within society and links strongly to authoritative discourse, in its shaping of these symbolic structures. To indicate the Symbolic, one can borrow from the notion of the noble lie by Plato (Žižek, 2010). The Symbolic incorporates the noble lie to serve society a narrative that extends beyond general experience. The idea here is that society and the people deserve better and that current existing social circumstances are only a temporary state that are soothed through the promise of a better future, one of harmony, notwithstanding actually existing societal struggle and exploitation. The Symbolic, therefore, becomes shaped through public discourse, this discourse functioning more in line with the noble lie than describing actual experienced social practice. The symbolic structure encapsulates an ideal description, thereby being closely linked to the space of the Imaginary, which informs the symbolic structures in society. The Imaginary captures the space of fantasy, and it is here that we can observe the first functioning of absurdity. When the Symbolic, or public discourse which is both orchestrated and spontaneously emerging, describes that which is publicly accepted enunciation, it links to the Imaginary through the supporting role of fantasy in sustaining and maintaining the symbolic structure. Hence, they work hand in hand to regulate social interaction through positing public discourse (i.e., the noble lie), which is then confirmed unconsciously through the support of fantasy in sustaining belief in the symbolic structure. Social practices which could then be classified as absurd are counteracted through the functioning of imagination, through which the absurd itself manifests as a fantasy in which all is normal, taken for granted, and accepted as is. In this way, absurdity functions as a fantasy to deny itself. The fantasy includes the sense of absurdity as normal which, in other words, is a fantasy that actively denies the absurdity from existing. We are confronted here with an active denial of the existence of absurdity through fantasmatic involvement in a sense of normality. This often manifests as

a belief in the abnormal as something that is extraneous to normality, or merely a byproduct or externality of civilization. It is not conceived as inherent to normality. Hence, normality can only be conceptualized on the basis of the disavowal of absurdity to contrast a notion of normality. For instance, in many Western European countries, a sense of self or national identity was never that strong in explicit, well-known terms (especially for smaller countries), but became reified through the entry of the Other (most notably refugees and immigrants who 'looked' differently, spoke another language, and had different cultural traditions). Hence, a sense of what is considered to be 'normal' and part of one's identity could only be imagined through the appearance of what is excluded, exposing the underlying absurdity of identity-supporting exclusionary normality. This sense of normality obfuscates the very notion of absurdity, through which absurdity is denied and fantasy takes over. It is in this sense that we observe the functioning of absurdity as fantasy, whereby fantasmatic involvement precludes the very exposure of absurdity. In Lacanian terminology, desire as acted out in fantasy is not so much about the question what one wants, and not even about what the other wants, but about what the other wants me to want. In other words, the fantasy of normality can be conceptualized as resulting from an individual's desire to want what the other wants the individual to want. This complex interplay about the lack of direct access to what one wants (and perceives) manifests in a desire for what could be externally composed as 'normal' or the desire of an individual to fit in, to comply, and confirm for mere acceptance and inclusion into social groups. This way, absurdity is repressed by the individual, as of its explosive potential to unmask the impotence of normality and consequently normality falling apart. It is thus, as alluded to before, not surprising to see the denial of absurdity for a sense of normality to protect ontological security and social belonging. However, we can also assess absurdity is not merely the denial through fantasy, but may also function at another level.

A second possibility for absurdity, therefore, is to belong to the space of the Lacanian Real, or the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized (Žižek, 1989). Normality, through its reification in public discourse, or within the symbolic structures of society, is projected as a space of reality. In other words, that which is commonly perceived to be our reality is also

filled with concepts of normality—reality is normal, until it is not. For instance, during the pandemic a realization emerged of abnormality, or even absurdity, when the structures of contemporary capitalist life were threatened (i.e., when lockdowns paralyzed societies worldwide). However, the lifting of restrictions, or a return to ‘normality,’ also meant a return to reality as an encapsulation of the symbolic structures with the Imaginary. In contrast to the disavowed absurdity within the symbolic structures and imaginary fantasmatic level, we can observe the third part of the order of human existence, the Real, to expose another functioning of absurdity. This pertains to the void that is left in the Symbolic and the Imaginary and is also referred to as the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized (Žižek, 1989). It is here that we can locate the second functioning of absurdity and refer to the more traumatic nature of absurdity as can be ascertained in social practice. While absurdity is commonly understood as that which transcends reason and logic, it is the space of the Real where we can find absurdity proper, in that which is not captured through the Symbolic. When the Symbolic is the collective of public discourse, and in extension all symbolic structures that regulate social interaction and society as such, there is also the space which cannot be covered by the Symbolic, that which is more traumatic and absurd. In other words, where the Symbolic fails, and thus where a gap or void is created, we can observe absurdity to manifest. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic elucidated the need for normality that drove especially Western societies to a pre-existing order after the restrictions were lifted, thereby not just exposing the absurdity of the sense of normality that was desired to return to (in its full exclusionary, neoliberal-capitalist mode), but in deeper terms, still concealing the more traumatic nature of the pandemic itself, as something that is deeply traumatic and containing profound psychological effects on societies and individuals. While referred to here and there (e.g., Silver, 2020; Stanley et al., 2021), the traumatic nature of the pandemic has been rather underacknowledged and poorly understood. An understanding of the pandemic as manifesting as an externality, as an event that can be interpreted in historical terms (while being compared to earlier plagues such as the London 1665 plague, or the Spanish Flu, or to other zoonotic diseases such as AIDS (Garrett, 1998)), does not suffice to capture the traumatic impact. For

instance, the rapid spread across the globe could only be explained in relation to the globalized capitalist economy with free and unlimited movement of both goods and people across the world, enabling the spread of the virus across the world in a period of weeks. The reporting of hospitalizations and casualties by the media in the first year of the pandemic highlighted the nature of the deadly virus, but disappeared when the pandemic was 'controlled' through the vaccinations. However, the total (global) death count for the pandemic became an abstract and almost meaningless number, but nonetheless exposes one major conclusion, that of the traumatic absurdity of the pandemic. The pandemic, in other words, acted not just as a global event that affected the entire world population, but also foregrounded the impact of climate change: while the entire global population will be affected by it, it also exposes in the inequalities between the most vulnerable people and societies that are at greatest risk and the well-off, the privileged individuals and societies, who were able to escape their predicament (Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021). Moreover, this trauma not only relies upon the structural systemic features that determine the course of the pandemic, but also the inherently linked nature of the pandemic, the neoliberal-capitalist system, and the associated problems of contemporary global society, such as climate change and inequality. As mentioned previously, the pandemic would fit conceptually into the great absurdity of our time (i.e., the destruction of our planet for economic profit), and thus it is not so much a discussion of how the pandemic linked to the global issues of today (e.g., inequality, climate change), but it should be a discussion on how the pandemic is inherently structured within neoliberal capitalism. While zoonotic viruses have caused pandemics throughout (recent) history and across the world, and therefore are nothing new, the current pandemic has elucidated the traumatic absurdity of our contemporary socioeconomic-political system. This is also what constitutes the void in the discussions on the pandemic, that which cannot be symbolized, cannot be captured through public discourse and symbolic structures that define general perception of what has occurred during the pandemic. This notion of absurdity as trauma is the second way through which it could be understood to function psychoanalytically. Psychologically, people escape the Real through fantasy, and as such reality can be an escape for people (Žižek, 2006).

Hence, reality is not a spontaneously emerging perspective for people, but a (retro-)actively constructed escape from the more traumatic experiences of the Real. To reiterate, reality is that what is commonly seen by the individual as how the world is shaped and how it is functioning. Yet, as Žižek (1989) explains, our conception of reality is shaped ideologically, as fantasy structures our perception of reality. The Real, in contrast, exposes the more traumatic side of absurdity in the void itself that cannot be captured by fantasy. The estimated global death count for COVID-19 of more than 6 million people (WHO, 2022) represents such traumatic kernel, the absurdity of the human cost of the global pandemic.

In sum, we have described two ways through which absurdity may unfold psychologically. These two ways call for an individual response in order to formulate a psychology of absurdity proper. In so doing, we need to integrate the concept of hypernormalization into the denial and maintenance of absurdity. While individuals usually live their lives following the implicit rules that dictate social interaction (Žižek, 2006), they may engage in rather unreflective living of their lives. At the same time, through (social) media and social interaction, they are also exposed to the ongoing absurdities facing contemporary societies. Such absurdities call for a response by the individual. While we postulate that absurdity can be denied, the question pertains how this process unfolds and what other possible reactions are possible. On the one hand, absurdity can be denied to exist, either unconsciously or deliberately. It is here that we find the space where the more collective process of hypernormalization becomes individualized and where we can locate the traces of an *individualized hypernormalization*, or the notion of an internalization of absurdity. On the other hand, absurdity can be embraced, but only when acknowledged, and we maintain that this constitutes a rather rare event.

Hypernormalization of Absurdity at the Individual Level

As described in the previous chapter, hypernormalization emerges and maintains itself at the collective level through institutionalization, rationalization, lack of alternative, and socialization. However, the question is how individuals cope with hypernormalization in society when they are faced with the earlier described collective practices. In addition to the above analysis of the psychology of absurdity, we discuss three interrelated processes: ideological fantasy, internalization, and disavowal. These explain how individuals are gripped by absurdities and maintain their beliefs in the absurd while faced at the same time with the rise of counterevidence. For instance, while the ever-rising income inequality becomes more absurd over time (World Economic Forum, 2019), it is insufficient to raise awareness of such matters to achieve a countermovement and a more equal wealth distribution. As absurdity does not concern itself with truth claims per se, rational arguments about the (un-)truthfulness of absurdity do not effectively address the issue (Bal, 2017). This is because of ideological fantasy about hypernormalization and the possibility for ontological security within absurdity (Mitzen, 2006). While it could be argued that absurdity functions as a threat to one's security, it is actually the explicit acknowledgment and conscious separation from absurdity that causes ontological *insecurity* (Croft, 2012) or hysteria (Žižek, 2006), as it entails a conscious breach from the established order within one's environment. Hence, while absurdity arises from the illogical gap between proclamation and reality, it is this gap which provides the ontological foundation for ideological fantasy and maintenance of hypernormalization (Žižek, 2018).

Therefore, hypernormalization is maintained through ideological investment and particularly the development of ideological fantasy of normality in absurdity. Hence, while absurdity as fantasy functions as an explanation of the psychology of absurdity, we accordingly use the idea of ideological fantasy to explain the hypernormalization of absurdity. We use ideology in the conceptualization of philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a 'fantasy construction which serves as a support for reality itself' (Žižek,

1989, p. 45)—see also Seeck et al. (2020). Hence, fantasy which underpins ideology in Žižekian thinking is not disconnected from reality, but offers reality itself. Therefore, ideological enunciation, such as Communist ideals within the Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2005), or meritocratic ideals in liberal-capitalism (Su, 2015), has an important fantasmatic logic (Glynos, 2008), in constituting and maintaining beliefs among individuals that what is proclaimed can not only be achieved, but also structures reality itself. For instance, a fantasy of meritocracy may not bear a strong relationship with really existing practices in society (Littler, 2013; Van Dijk et al., 2020), but may form an ideological reference that structures society as if it does exist.

As described above, absurdity also functions as an ideological fantasy, as its underlying social practice is not judged on the basis of rationality or the possibility of actual manifestation, but on the fantasmatic engagement it provides to people. For instance, the absurdity of closing borders to foreigners and refugees includes the fantasy of an ‘unspoiled’ homeland and that refugee streams (such as taking place in the Mediterranean Sea) will end when borders are closed. Absurdity as a fantasy that structures reality becomes ideological (Žižek, 1989) and thereby aligns to ideological dynamics in society, such as the maintenance of White, neo-liberal capitalism in contemporary Western society (e.g., Arciniega, 2021). Individuals can deny the existence of and maintain their beliefs in absurdity through fantasizing about how social reality is actually formed through the fantasy itself. Thereby, the fantasy becomes performative, and people act as if the absurdity is entirely normal, complying with the normalization of the absurdity. For instance, people may fantasize about closed national borders as an effective solution to societal problems which may be unrelated to immigration (such as inflation, poverty, or unemployment). Consequently, the solution becomes reality, and individuals do not reflect upon the likelihood of eradicating societal problems through closing borders.

As a result, absurdity itself is denied and thereby maintained and rationalized through adaptation of perceptions of what valid norms of society are (Haack & Sieweke, 2018). Yet, the fantasmatic logic does not fully explain the dynamics underpinning individual responses to hypernormalization. We therefore discuss the role of internalization and disavowal

(Žižek 1989, 2001) in relation to the psychological dimensions underpinning the maintenance of hypernormalization. The question is how individuals in modern society are gripped by hypernormalization and why individuals continue to fantasize about and invest in hypernormalization to maintain a sense of ontological security. If a critical mass within society or an organization would recognize the absurdity of their predicament, why do they not resist individually and collectively, such that this gap between proclaimed ideals within society (i.e., the official ideologies) and reality is decreased and such that these ideals do not merely have a symbolic function, but a truly constative one? While Žižek (1989, 2018) points to the very problematic nature of the official ideology itself and the impossibility of transforming empty signifiers of ideology into practices (e.g., brotherhood, equality, and meritocracy), people also maintain their individual psychological belief and investment in absurdity. In other words, just like in the Soviet Union, there is no binary split between public discourse and really existing practices, as individuals are engaged both in the performative and constative dimension of modern ideology, thereby continuing to internalize absurdity.

In line with Žižek (1989, p. 12, 2001), this attitude can be explained on the basis of cynical disavowal: 'I know very well that we are confronted with absurdity, but I still fully participate in its performative dimension.' This plays out largely in the unconscious domain as a fantasy and influences actual human behavior. Yet, it may only partially be acknowledged by people when explicitly confronted with it, or even dismissed as untrue. In other words, absurdity is currently upfront and no longer hidden from the public eye and thereby fully integrated into public discourse (e.g., rising inequality is now acknowledged by the very institutions responsible for the creation of it, see, e.g., the World Economic Forum, 2019). People can thus no longer deny that absurdity exists, such as increasing inequality, but have become cynical about it and are disavowing the integrated nature of absurdity into the fabric of society. Meanwhile, they may fantasize about the meritocratic structure of society that would legitimize inequality (Van Dijk et al., 2020). As long as people maintain a fantasmatic investment into meritocracy, they are able to blame people who fail for not working hard enough for it, while

the 'winners' can be celebrated for their entrepreneurial spirit. Disavowal thus works hand in hand with fantasmatic involvement into ideology.

Because in hypernormalization, perceptions of lack of alternative are central, this further sustains feelings of powerlessness. When people feel powerless to make any real changes, they are more likely to legitimize the system (Van der Toorn et al., 2015). Powerlessness indicates the subjective experience of individuals towards the system, which leads to inertia and cynicism (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). When people feel unable to affect their own situation and their environment, they will be more likely to bridge the gap between enunciation and reality through cynicism. This attitude is predicted by feelings of powerlessness (Van der Toorn et al., 2015) and ontological insecurity (Mitzen, 2006), which can be understood as the inhibitors of what Yurchak (2005) referred to as the reinterpretation of the constative dimension of ideology into creative ways to refind meaning within absurdity.

At the same time, however, disavowal is generated through the internalization of ideology into people's core fantasies about themselves and society (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Hence, ideological enunciation becomes internalized as fantasies that actually support reality. Such beliefs are not about universal truths, but about personal truths. In other words, people actively search for support for their fantasies in themselves and others in their vicinity (either in real life or online), so that their fantasies can remain intact, and the absurdity is denied as either non-existent or irrelevant. Internalization of ideological fantasies (Glynos, 2008) renders ideological enunciation as truth-statements (e.g., that Western society is meritocratic and that everyone has a fair chance to success and social mobility), which closes the gap with reality, thereby blaming individuals for their failure to be on the receiving end of the unequal distribution of resources and success in society (Bal & Dóci, 2018).

Through internalization of absurdity into one's core beliefs about the structure of society, people fantasize that there is *no* gap between enunciation and really existing practices, and therefore they feel as if they do not have to engage in performative rituals of reproduction of form, but are merely engaged in the constative dimension of authoritative discourse (i.e., they believe their behavior is directly constitutive of reality). Hence, hypernormalization unfolds via the fantasy of correspondence:

authoritative discourse is constitutive of reality in this fantasy, and any possible traumatic Real is denied. For instance, the absurdity of proclaimed commitment of large fossil-fuel companies to sustainability and climate action (Brown, 2016) vis-à-vis the real environmental destruction by these companies and their role in climate disaster is disavowed, whereby the fantasy of commitment to combat climate change is sustained. Therefore, there is 'pseudo-genuine' belief in that such companies should be at the forefront of the transition to a zero-carbon society and that their greenwashing attempts through advertising are ultimately authentic and well meant. In this fantasy, absurdity itself is still denied, and people fantasize about how they engage themselves in the constative dimensions of climate action when they recycle their waste, even though recycling does not significantly address any of the issues around climate change (Blühdorn, 2017; Brown, 2016). Hence, recycling is *not nearly radical enough*, when fossil fuel companies continue on their path of planetary destruction. This also indicates that individuals are pragmatic translators of authoritative discourse; while practice may not have a meaningful relation to discourse, people continue to act as if it does and may thereby maintain their beliefs in the system and the hypernormalized nature of society. Moreover, the more traumatic aspects of the Real of climate change are disavowed and normalized through ignorance.

In sum, hypernormalization as the normalization of absurdity unfolds in similar ways as described in Yurchak's (2003, 2005) analysis of the late Soviet Union. While contemporary authoritative discourse is controlled to a lesser extent by governments in Western society than in the Soviet Union, it has become increasingly frozen in describing neoliberal-capitalist fantasies about society and workplace (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Glynos, 2008). The absurdities arising from the discrepancies between discourse and really existing practices have been normalized and maintained at collective and individual levels through ideological fantasy and internalization. While hypernormalization offers stability and predictability, the continuing need for individuals to pragmatism in order to deal with the effects of the gap between the performative and constative dimension of authoritative discourse has also spurred a crisis of legitimacy in contemporary society (*cf.* Yurchak, 2005). For instance, the absurdities of inertia towards climate disaster, societal inequalities, and

racism can hardly and with increasing difficulty be denied in society, and a rising number of protests have emerged in response to these absurdities inherent to contemporary society.

Advanced Stages of Hypernormalization

In other words, it seems that we are entering a new stage of hypernormalization, where despite global attention to the pressing issues in society and workplace, hypernormalization seems to be strengthened even more. In this case, drawing the attention to the problematic features in contemporary society may ultimately serve a conservative agenda of retaining the status quo. After all, testifying ‘authentic’ concern about these issues (see, e.g., proclaiming commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals from the United Nations) may come with reputational benefit, while actual action towards properly addressing these issues may be less visible, if not absent. This further sustains the ultimate fantasy of normality and helps individuals to retain ontological security. Moreover, it is observable how the analysis from Yurchak (2005) compares to contemporary society: individuals may not be disengaged from authoritative discourse (e.g., ‘truly’ believing in the ideals of meritocracy and genuine commitment to climate change) while at the same time observing how daily reality is opposed to such commitments. To be able to pragmatically cope with this ongoing gap between discourse and reality, the role of fantasy becomes even more important: it is no longer because of the suppressed nature of societal problems that absurdity does not manifest easily to people, but *despite* of continuous attention to such problems that people invest more fantasmatic energy into hypernormalization. Despite the severity of societal problems, unconscious fantasy helps to perceive politicians and business leaders expressing a genuine commitment, and often narratives of hope and delayed gratification sustain order and acquiescence. For instance, the concept of hope becomes fashionable again, as a necessary means to avoid depression, anxiety, and despair. Yet, just as in the Soviet Union, the costs of maintaining hypernormalization in the face of rising absurdity become higher and higher. Meanwhile, more and more people fall through the cracks in the system, and rising numbers of

depression can be witnessed (e.g., Bell & Blanchflower, 2019). Notwithstanding the varied range of possibilities of explaining lack of well-being in contemporary society, the rising numbers of depression could also be indicative of fantasy ceasing to remain functional in relation to hypernormalizing the status quo, whereby people experience dissolution into absurdity awareness and despair. In this case, it is a matter of either re-strengthening hypernormalization processes, whereby people, notwithstanding counterevidence, remain invested in absurdity disavowal and normality ('even though I am continuously confronted with societal events which no longer make any sense, I continue to live my life pretending normality'), or it is a case of escalating absurdity hysteria (Žižek, 2006).

Absurdity hysteria creates the possibility for the 'absurd moment,' the moment where one sees 'reality as it really is,' a glimpse into the Real. It is thus about a process of embarking upon the possibility of absurdity responses that more directly engage with the absurdities themselves, rather than continuing hypernormalization to be effective. Various scholars have engaged with this question, including Camus himself when he spoke about 'embracing absurdity' and defying absurdity through the creative act. Rebellion against absurdity is a necessity that manifests not merely as an act of resistance, but firstly as a process of understanding, of reflection upon the more hidden and unconscious aspects of absurdity, such as the Real that infuses a more traumatic insight into absurdity, whereby it fully exposes the tragic and dangerous nature of absurdity. Fantasy disintegrates into despair, creating a situation of ontological insecurity, explaining the observed symptoms such as alienation (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021) or depression (Bell & Blanchflower, 2019). It may be too optimistic to call for an embracing of absurdity in such moments of clarity. While forming a necessity in unmasking absurdity (Bal, 2020), it is far from evident that the dangerous nature of absurdity (exposure) would *not* apply to the individual. Nonetheless, the absurd moment constitutes a revelation, a moment where an individual becomes aware of the absurdity present in social practice. It is an awareness of the gap between discourse and really existing practices, the slowly grown perception that authoritative discourse falls apart and has become meaningless and that even though the discourse itself may have an appealing effect in its

projected vision of fairness, dignity, and sustainability, these have disintegrated into empty signifiers that are merely misused to protect the status quo and hegemonic order serving the elites. In that sense, this moment of revelation by definition has to counteract nothing more than the forces of institutionalization, rationalization, a lack of alternative perspectives, and socialization. It is thus not surprising to see the individual profoundly being invested unconsciously in the status quo of absurdity unawareness, and it is only when the individual breaks through all of these forces that the absurdity may be recognized. While this creates great ontological insecurity, it is also a necessity to be able to engage in constructive rebellion. However, what should this rebellion be directed to?

Following the previous analyses, it would be tempting to argue that addressing absurdity would involve the alignment, or removal of incongruence, of authoritative discourse with really existing practices. Theoretically, it could be argued that closing the gap would mean a more straightforward relationship between discourse and practice, through which social problems could be better captured widely by corresponding discourse in society. And to some extent, is this not precisely happening? After all, societal problems such as climate change, inequality, and racism are discussed publicly, addressed, and increasingly problematized by the very powerful in society (e.g., politicians, business leaders). However, there are (at least) two fallacies present here. On the one hand, while addressing societal problems, and thus incorporating actual societal problems into discourse, is happening, it can be shown how this is far from sufficient to actually change social circumstances. As will be discussed in Chap. 9, a more integrative process is needed to get from absurdity awareness towards actually changing social circumstances. Thus, the raising of awareness of absurdity is not nearly enough, as the perpetual force of hypernormalization remains effective in maintaining the status quo. It has been discussed widely how appealing discourse on sustainability and corporate social responsibility has become delegitimize because of greenwashing—the very notion that ultimately discourse is unable to capture actual manifestation. Moreover, beyond this inability of alignment between discourse and manifestation, it should be acknowledged how discourse is continuously manipulated—the notion of advertising, which forms the very grounding of the economic structure behind the Internet and

contemporary life, is based on the creation and manipulation of discourse in order to create desire. Two aspects stand out which provide a deeper understanding of the impotence of discourse-manifestation alignment.

First, Žižek (2018, p. 205) argues for a 'positive' revaluation of the gap between enunciation and practice, as this dissonance makes ideology 'livable' and therefore constitutes a condition for its actual functioning. Without the gap, the ideological edifice falls apart, as we would no longer be able to attribute personal failure to the system itself, but only to ourselves as individuals, and the cure would moral improvement of the individual (Žižek, 2018). Hence, absurdity indicated by the widening gap between pretense and practice also offers a way out for systemic critique and, instead of blaming individuals and trying to 'fix' them, also opens the space for such critique and reinterpretation within the constraints of hypernormalization. What, in other words, would happen if society would *actually* be fair and consistent? If people fail, are unemployed, they would have no society to blame and only themselves. Hence, paradoxically enough, inequality in society is also what makes it livable. However, in refraining from postulating utopias of non-absurdity, it perhaps is more instructive to conceptualize a continuous struggle against the dehumanizing and destructive effects of absurdity maintenance and the continuous struggle against hegemonic hypernormalization in society.

Second, while public discourse captures partially the Symbolic structures in society, human existence consists in Lacanian terminology of at least two other aspects, the Imaginary and the Real (Eyers, 2012). Whereas the Real indicates the gap that is unexplained through the Symbolic and the Imaginary, the void that always remains there, it can be perceived how the traumatic aspects of contemporary absurdities can be at least partly recognized, but very rarely fully understood in relation to its more hidden, unconscious aspects. To make it more concrete, absurdities can be captured through discourse, but remain discussed at the level of manifestation rather than deeper lying causes, including the neoliberal-capitalist structures that determine contemporary society. To truly address absurdity in social practice, one cannot escape the necessity of questioning the neoliberal-capitalist underpinnings. The great absurdity of our time, that of the destruction of the planet for economic profit, remains untouched and derives directly from the hegemonic capitalist ideology.

Any way out of the destruction of the planet needs to be theorized *within* the constraints of capitalism and thus the structuring of the economy, organizational life, and human existence. To quote Fredric Jameson, 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.' The Real of capitalism (Vanheule, 2016) remains largely untouched in the present discourse around the major challenges of our society. In this sense, neoliberal capitalism remains hypernormalized, reminiscent of Thatcher's famous axiom 'There is no alternative.' Does this then mean that there is effectively no way out of absurdity or hypernormalization?

Returning to the notion of absurdity as indicative of the meaninglessness of life, there might be some clues about a 'way out of hypernormalization.' Camus (1942) proposed that life itself is absurd, as it is inherently meaningless, and people themselves are responsible to make life meaningful (see also Starkey et al., 2019). As death is inevitable, and it is more than likely that individual human behavior has no effect in the long term, it could be concluded that individual life is principally meaningless. This meaninglessness makes life absurd, but Camus (1942) refuses suicide and proposes an art of living, through defiance or scorn (Mintoff, 2008; Nagel, 1971). One possible lesson from Camus in light of the current discussion is the connection with perception and behavior. While absurdity is inherent to society and workplaces and core to societal functioning, Camus argues to refrain from merely complying and instead show resistance and defiance to absurdity. This can be done first through acceptance of absurdity as inherent to human existence. Secondly, a way out of meaninglessness can be found through acceptance of absurdity (Mintoff, 2008).

Accepting or embracing absurdity means to open up to the possibility of acknowledging the multilayered manifestation of social practice, the abolishment of singular truths, the acceptance of the perpetual gap between the Symbolic and the Real, between discourse and really existing practices, and the inherent limitation of absurdity disavowal. Such acceptance opens the way for alternative interpretations, the opening up of possibilities beyond normalization, beyond compliance for survival, and the necessity of escaping the predicament of the impossible paradox. Hence, this means a refusal to seek for the hypernormal as the mirror reflection of absurdity or overengagement into normality to find some

‘authentic’ core to return to in uncertain times. It also involves a refusal to overinvest in rationality in the face of the dissolution of logic itself. In other words, just as fact-checking remains impotent in combatting against fake news, overreliance on rationality, reason, and logic does not effectively address absurdity itself. It posits a counterpoint to absurdity, but all that can be ascertained in the mirror image of absurdity remains within the hypernormal. Instead, it is not surprising that calls have been made for a radical alternative, a third way out of the impossible paradox itself. This is what is needed in contemporary society and workplaces: not merely an attempt to address the problematic features of our socioeconomic-political structures, but to formulate a radical alternative and find ways to contribute to achieving societal change (Bal & Brookes, 2022).

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4

From Hypernormalization of Workplace Inequality to Dehumanization: A Way Out for Human Resource Management

Introduction

Why does human resource management (HRM) keep reproducing scholarly debates and discussions that perhaps (un)intentionally recreate and perpetuate workplace inequality, including income and gender, race, and societal inequality (Bratton & Gold, 2017; Guerci et al., 2021)? What such reproduction of various forms/facets of workplace inequality through the adoption of multiple HRM practices such as training and development, hiring, reward, and performance management has done over the decades is stabilized the discourse on the types of inequalities we have had in workplaces and society. However, what such growing research have missed is the lack of acknowledgment of the fundamental principles underpinning the normalization of such inequality and whether there may even be a way out for the central discipline tasked with addressing such gender, race, ethnicity, religious, and other types of inequalities at work: HRM. Part of the underpinning fundamental that has not been addressed previously is a critical appraisal of the inequality discourses and how they have been applied through standardized HRM procedures in the hiring, training, development, and performance appraisal of staff to

ascertain the extent to which people who experience such practices are treated. It is even acknowledged fleetingly in previous scholarship that an examination of hiring processes is the start of unearthing whether people are treated as if they were objects and therein dehumanized within a process that is paradoxically supposed to embed equality within it (Bernard et al., 2018; Vaes et al., 2012). The focus of this chapter is to examine the theoretical and practical instances where workplace hiring practices have been applied unquestioningly on already marginalized communities such as autistic jobseekers to the extent that their treatment by HR managers can be labeled as dehumanizing (or less human). To achieve this focus, I use Tilly's (1998) seminal scholarship on inequality to initially pose and then examine (through additional debates) the central question which is 'why has the unquestioned reproduction of the normalization of workplace inequality continued in contemporary research and Human Resource Management practice to the extent that it has created marginalised communities within the workplace and society?' I present the traditional approaches to workplace inequality, with the main anchor on Tilly's (1998) work on 'Durable Inequality' to critique the stabilization of HRM's hiring, performance management, and training practices to paired, yet unequal, autistic and non-autistic staff. Although Tilly highlights the social mechanisms, I do so to reflect on how earlier and subsequent approaches have inadvertently maintained an institutional culture (or a hypernormalization) of workplace inequality. This apparently unintended normalization of workplace inequality is antithetical to the dominant HRM discourse promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion and creates a void between what is espoused in the inequality theorization of Tilly and his advocates and the normalization of inequality that is experienced by marginalized communities such as highly capable autistic people. Such a theory-practice/experience gap has led to the (perhaps unintended) dehumanization of autistic staff which highlights the normalization of the absurd in workplace and society. This normalization serves as both a scholarship and practice void, which is addressed in this chapter's theoretical framework, the findings and discussions, and the proposition of four interventions and a resilience model to fill such a neglect. The interventions and model are expected to firstly extend Tilly's work on the causes of long-lasting social inequalities but also the

categorical differences he has used to account for unequal pairings (e.g., Black/White, male/female) in society. Secondly, by critiquing Tilly and his followers' critique of the social stratification method used to categorize societal inequalities and differences, I reintroduce the very personal preferences and group attributes, which Tilly and his followers had discredited in their meta-analysis to provide both an alternative set of interventions as potential solutions and a reconceptualization of workplace inequality. Thirdly, I highlight how Yurchak's (2013; see 2003 for earlier version) 'hypernormalization of the absurd' has, over time, led to the identification of more specific forms of the normalization of workplace inequality and societal disparity by focusing on both the categorical distinctions/differences between autistic and non-autistic staff and the individual and group distinctions to highlight the specificity of such inequality normalization. However, there is an even bigger void/gap in the debates and discussions on inequality, which is that organizational efforts to address the problem through traditional HRM procedures of recruitment, selection, and performance management measures have only succeeded in surfacing the wider societal marginalization felt by some communities (Stainback et al., 2010; Tomaskovic-Devey et al., 2009). To find out more on how these debates have reproduced/normalized inequality, I examine other nuanced aspects in the scholarly debates, which emphasize the primacy of legislation to address hidden workplace inequality while, at the same time, neglecting how those HRM practices included in hiring, performance appraisals, and inductions have enhanced the normalization of inequality between unequal categorical pairings (Nachmias & Caven, 2018).

Although he is accredited with the notion of 'hypernormalization,' Yurchak did not capture how the normalization of workplace inequality could evolve as part of a process of the normalization of HRM practices, whose adoption over time helps in perpetuating absurdity. As such, the normalization of inequality at work can be captured and presented at the organizational level, where HRM practices are designed, implemented, and experienced by various categorical employment distinctions. Such a remiss, therefore, presented a false sense of legitimacy for the normalization of inequality and the dehumanization of specific sectors of the workplace and society. Such replication/reproduction has also tended to

simplify how other complex socio-economic, legal, and humanitarian aspects were involved in the unexpected yet sudden crumbling of the very bureaucratic and autocratic forms that maintained such imposition of a state of normalcy. Despite the shortcoming and the disappointment that the 'until it was no more' (crumbling of the reproduction of oppressive bureaucratic form) brought to its Soviet autocrats, the antithetical presentation of the Soviet Union in the 1980s as an emblem of paradise brought with it a conceptual lens of how not to manage or govern people at a national level but also what happens when a way of life (a culture of governance and behaving) has become so endemic that it is unquestioningly accepted as a 'hypernormalized' status quo. This status quo has sadly become accepted and even practiced by researchers and HRM professionals in a fundamental aspect of management, namely, hiring. It is the unwitting application of standardization of hiring practices in the workplace that I critique to see what could be contributed to Yurchak's hypernormalization and thereby open the gates to future research.

Structurally, I draw on various scholarly perspectives (both traditional and contemporary) to critique the hypernormalization of workplace inequality in a range of contextual settings to show how such a scholarly practice has led to a dead end for HRM scholarship. By drawing on varied contextualized research in autism scholarship, I try to show how studies on autism in different countries have propagated instances of inequality in the workplace, thereby stabilizing an unquestioning acceptance of systemic and widespread inequality at work and in society. Finally, I use the survey materials of a research project with 24 autistic jobseekers to highlight their contextualized challenges in the UK and to narrate what was practically done to address workplace inequality. Four proposals (interventions) are advanced, based on the examined literature and the research project to show how HRM, as the social science discipline that is expected to intervene in this area, can provide a way out of the normalization of workplace inequality whose naïve adoption in the expectation that they would create equality, diversity, and inclusion through hiring, reward, training, and performance management has led to the dehumanization/objectification of autistic jobseekers. Such absurdity examination has not been attempted in previous HRM scholarship, literature, and debates.

The conclusion provides some recommendations for theory and professional practice on how HRM can step up to address workplace and wider social inequality issues.

Inequality Theory

Inequality as a Hypernormalized Process

This chapter examines the extent to which aspects of Yurchak's hypernormalization have permeated human resource management and contributed to the stabilization of the marginalization and inequality discourse by focusing on Tilly's (1998) seminal scholarship called *Durable Inequality*. Although previous scholars such as Glenn (2002) included various categorization of inequality, namely, race, class, income, and gender disparities, in their expositions of the topic (also see Acker, 2006; Marsh, 2011), Tilly was the first to highlight how inequality ought to be understood from the interpersonal relationships between individuals in society by adopting a relational lens to inequality (Tomasovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). Such a relational approach is important as it depicts the dynamics and potential changes in the relationality, the contexts within which the relationships are transacted and, therefore, the nature of the inequality problem. By adopting such an approach, Tilly highlighted how inequality has become systemic and last for an organization's or society's lifetime by investigating the causes of the inequality within paired representations in society using race (Black and White), gender (female and male), or nationality (citizen and non-citizen). Through such categorical, paired distinctions, Tilly showed how they become institutionalized (part of a culture) and sedimented (ossified in organizational architectures) over time thereby creating 'durable inequality.' He attributed the long-lasting nature of such inequality of the pairings to how each of the parties depends on the solutions to the inequality problem rather than an examination of the underlying processes and the trends that may have reproduced the inequality in the first place. Tilly used the examples of apartheid South Africa and a racially divided USA of the

1920s, 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s to demonstrate how the resolution of Black and White segregation could not be resolved simply by examining the structures that produced the inequality rather than the processes via which the relations to such inequality ought to be examined. However, the relationality between pairings robs us of the possibilities of examining relationality between multiple pairings. These relational pairing-aspects are again echoed in Yurchak's depiction of the Soviet Union in the 1980s although Yurchak was preoccupied with the state bureaucratic forms that are responsible for stabilizing an acceptance of societal inequality. As a way of highlighting the underpinnings behind these societal challenges, Yurchak bi-polarized (in order to show the relational pairings between) an examination of the late Soviet Union into a socio-political reality and philosophical nexus to show how everything, including inequality, has been hypernormalized to a state of unquestioning acquiescence. Interestingly, Tilly's relational pairings approach was more interested in how inequality should be regarded as part of a process within which people have agency vying to show how valuable their contributions ought to count and by so doing discount or marginalize the contributions of others. Although this was not the case in Yurchak's work, the implicit discounting of other contributions in the inequality debates has narrowed other possibilities and standardized or even hypernormalized workplace inequality into challenge identification versus mitigation strategies. For example, Kaplan and Mikes (2012) identified three major types of challenges/risks to an organization, including political and natural disasters and macroeconomic paradigm shift. They argued that managers should focus on identifying mitigation measures. They identified the compliance approach as suitable for the management of preventable (mainly internal) challenges/risks such as health and safety, whereas other fundamental shifts to decision-making may be needed in addressing externally triggered challenges ranging from climate change to the fluctuating demands and pressures from marginalized communities. However, Foster and Kaplan (2001) also note how the notion of 'cultural lock-in' (i.e., senior management's stiffening of a firm's invisible decision-making framework) could hamper or ossify the very control systems, decision-making processes, and mental capabilities that are expected to provide

the necessary and appropriate mitigation interventions to the challenges posed. On the other hand, Tilly's argument focuses on how a phenomenon such as workplace inequality undergoes a generative process, be it at an organizational (national or even international) level, whereby agents do ascribe value to their mitigation actions. Tilly highlights how an exploitative class may choose to control a country's/firm's resources and thereby extract maximum benefit from the utilization of others' inputs while ostracizing them from enjoying the fullest value of their contributions (e.g., apartheid South Africa). However, he fails to explore how multiple agencies ascribing value propositions to how they intend to address the challenges they face could lead to something more dynamic within the traditional challenge-mitigation approach.

Inequality as a Marginalization Process

Although this explication has helped in spotlighting how two of the underpinning drivers help in the appreciation of the genesis of workplace inequality, namely, the control and exploitation of organizational resources by a selected few (those managers who have been challenged), it is through their agency (their ability to mitigate/resolve the challenge/risk) that they produce not only the structures for such inequality but also the relations driving the inequality. Debates on inequality have even extended to how slavery and immigration discrimination practices have been normalized in the past and in current times and used by some scholars such as Munoz (2008) to denote principal aspects/drivers of inequality. In resource exploitation, Tilly surfaces a process via which individuals with power and authority control and utilize vast amounts of resources to utilize the efforts of others in producing and adding value to the original resources without enjoying the outcomes of their labor. They do so coercively through organizational procedures and policies on performance, reward, remuneration and training, and legislative or even repressive force. However, Mann (1999) and Wright (2000) have also clarified that Tilly's arguments were originally borrowed from Marx's theorization on labor value. The opportunity hoarding type of inequality highlights how members of specific group limit value-enhancing resources for the

specific use of their group at the detriment of others outside. Although Tilly's focus was on how the elite group do engage in opportunity hoarding, he also highlighted how non-elites may choose to engage with those who control such resources in peace-building exercises so as to try and progress within such structures rather than find ways of dismantling it. Such a process has led to the organizational and social exclusion of wider networks that may choose not to engage or associate, and such lack of engagement and commitment could be considered a fundamental HRM problem. This echoes Weber's (1996) and Parkin's (1979) notion of social closure.

Inequality as a Sociological Process

The literature on inequality has also received additional attention from a socio-structural lens. Jin and Lee (2017) explained how workplace inequality may have been legitimized by adopting a functionalist sociological approach in which social class differences have led to inequality being perceived as a challenge. They also note how this is largely contingent upon factors outside of the individuals' influence. However, the extent to which social classification may or may not be viewed as part of inequality was coined in Zhao and Wry's (2016) famous adage that 'not all inequality is equal.' The functionalist and rather contentious approach to workplace or societal inequality has been predominantly observed in the standardized application of HRM practices such as recruitment and selection and performance and the wider inequality tendencies that their mismanagement could have on individuals and communities. Jin and Lee believe that social structures and the systems therein determine individuals' living conditions (such as their wealth accumulation propensity, their gender, and their ethnicity associations). Despite these structural determinants, they also claimed that an individual's efforts in acquiring the necessary professional, practical, and academic qualifications and skills could help (but not guarantee to) improve their level of inequality. However, Li et al. (2018) and Witt and Redding (2014) believe that state-controlled mechanisms/institutions ranging from the economic to the educational to the security

set-ups have maintained and systematically institutionalized or, in Yurchak's words, 'hypernormalized' inequality as a fundamental challenge faced by society, contemporary workplaces, and HR professionals. Tilly highlights how state institutions and organizational procedures can be utilized as forms and vehicles of *emulation* (i.e., copying and implementing so-called best practice HRM models in totally new business environments). When this fails to maintain the status quo, Tilly highlights how the *adaptation* process, which enhances the reproduction of an organization's or country's rules-based procedures, policies, and practices to enable people to cope in new environments while, simultaneously, reproducing the expected (unequal) categorical pairings distinctions in relationships. Here, of course, are echoes of the new institutionalism.

Inequality as an Organizing Process

Other possible explications and debates on inequality include Munoz's (2008) racial inequality. However, discussions on race have since been superseded by Le Grand and Tählin (2013), who claim that it is much more beneficial to understand the way work is organized into different categories if we are to deepen our knowledge on how inequality practices are actually produced and stabilized as a key challenge in contemporary society. Although Tilly (1998), Munoz (2008), and Tomascovic-Devey and Avent-Holt (2019), among others, have adopted the relational and processual view to how workplace inequality may be generated, there have been growing concerns that adopting the organizational lens to inequality may not be sufficient if we are to firstly understand the more individualistic experiences of inequality (Gagnon & Cornelius, 2000) and secondly to appreciate the wider societal-level challenges. These scholars claim that patriarchy has contributed to influencing, maintaining, and stabilizing institutional logics, beliefs, and practices leading to the hypernormalization of workplace inequality procedures. Furthermore, Grimshaw et al. (2017) believe that it is the way the labor market has been segmented which has brought about organizational-level, workplace inequality. Although Le Grand and Tählin's (2013) and Kalleberg's (2003, 2011) 'good and bad jobs' has partly stabilized this type of inequality

categorization and polarization, Vallas (2012) believes that workplace inequality should be attributed not only to labor market segmentation, similar to the way the Soviet Union of the 1980s was ethnically stratified, but also to how production processes have tended to value and consequently reward a selected few in workplaces and society. The same arguments and claims have been proffered by segmented labor market theorists such as Srivastava (2019) and Lopez-Roldan and Fachelli (2021) to argue how even though the structures that influence job categorization may largely be driven by external labor market conditions, the internal organizational procedures used have also, in parts, exacerbated employers' understandings of which jobs should be performed by which genders, races, and classes in society and how unequally they should be treated. The latter aspect is similar to the bureaucratic tendencies in the Soviet Union of keeping large swathes of people subjugated under the delusional logic of stability. Interestingly, these debates have only highlighted a trend of hyper-categorized sets of challenges in terms of inequality but stopped short of signaling how HR can contribute in addressing this hypernormalization and hyper-categorization.

Contextualizing Inequality Within Autism and Employment Research

Having observed the bi-polarization of inequality, which has led to a hyper-categorized challenge versus mitigation camp in the debates, this section contextualizes workplace inequality by situating it within autism and HRM/employment-related studies, something that has not been previously attempted. I draw from various scholarships around the world to show what is still lagging. For example, in the UK, research shows that although only 32% of adults with autism conditions are employed, only 16% of these are in full-time work (Howlin et al., 2005). In the USA, Australia, and Canada, the unemployment figures of autistic adults pointing to workplace and societal inequality are more alarming (Roux et al., 2015; Baldwin et al., 2014; Eaves & Ho, 2008) in comparison to those with other types of disabilities seeking employment (Hedley et al., 2017). Such difficulty in obtaining and retaining work opportunities (e.g.,

Baldwin et al., 2014) has also been amplified by the fact that people with autism find it hard to make the necessary workplace adaptations and thereby end up leaving jobs more frequently than other colleagues without such a condition (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004). Research has also found that autistic employees are still beset with having to navigate challenges at the recruitment and selection stages as most companies use traditional person specifications and job descriptions which do not align with the needs of autistic people thereby revealing a state of neglect (Burgess & Cimera, 2014; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). Again, these point to the adoption of the traditional challenge identification approach in inequality studies. Sheridan (2018) found that the gender pay gap/inequality in Australia since the 1980s has grown to 15.3% in spite of the fact that 46% of the country's workforce are women compared to the UK's 72.2%, which also registered a workforce decline of 0.5% (ONS, 2020); it is interesting to note from such studies that women who were found in low-paid and low-skilled jobs were predominantly those with some mental or disability condition. The Australian study also highlighted how socio-economic inequality was exacerbated by workplace practices that tended to promote discrimination against an already marginalized group of workers (the double challenge whammy). The tendency therefore for women to reach higher levels of management was quite minimalistic (Dalingwater, 2018). Part of the explanation for such endemic gender-based inequality has been ascribed to the adoption by most organizations of neoliberal tendencies, whereby firms organize how work is delivered on the basis of a competitive and free market ideology and policy implementation in the Western world. Such neoliberal tendencies were more pronouncedly felt in workplaces in the UK. The current state of autism research therefore shows an unfolding high level of inequality not only within organizational but also national/societal contexts.

The pervasiveness of inequality practices that have hypernormalized the marginalization of certain groups in the workplace, especially those with autism conditions, could be further understood if we turn our attention to the role that HRM has had (or is expected) to play in this. Cooper and Kennady (2021) found that 95 autistic participants from a 600 neurodiverse group of employees experienced recruitment and selection

procedures and practices that reflected no appreciation of their existing conditions and challenges. They also found a generally negative work experience for such a group in all aspects of the recruitment, selection, and performance management processes. The experiences even worsened the more neurodiverse and minority ethnically orientated the employee was. However, managers' good understanding of neurodiversity helped to alleviate the negative experiences felt by the autistic group. Similarly, Gal et al. (2015) articulated some of the negative communication experiences that autistic employees faced when they were being interviewed as the procedure did not account for their individual needs (Barnham & Martin, 2017). Such negativity could be explicable in the sense that the necessary legal reasonable adjustments for their social, sensory, and communication requirements were not met (López & Keenan, 2014). Again, such a group is perceived as a challenge to be dealt with. Likewise, the psychometric tests that were conducted on them were far from suitable for people living with such conditions. Out of the 24 (12 males and 12 females) clinically diagnosed people ranging between 26 and 66 years either in or out of employment in the UK, Romualdez et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews and found a mixed set of results. While some autistic employees chose not to disclose for fear of reprisals and further negativity, others preferred to disclose their neurodiverse conditions in hopeful attempts to be included in their organizations' activities (also see the work of Wood and Happé, 2020, on autistic teachers in the UK). Vincent (2020) also interviewed a snowballed sampled population of 21 UK autistic graduates (6 females and 15 males). There was also an additional 58 people who comprised part of support networks (such as support workers, advisors, and parents), and they registered negative experiences ranging from not understanding the recruitment practices to lack of workplace adaptations to fit their conditions to feeling overwhelmed. Similar discomfort triggered by workplace mal-adaptations (such as communication and physical sensory distractions) was raised in Waisman-Nitzan et al.'s (2021) study of 19 autistic employees in the USA, aged between 22 and 29, to see the extent to which the personal, environmental, and job characteristics impeded or enhanced their job performance. Even the theoretical review of over 800 articles between

1987 and 2018 conducted by Khalifa et al. (2020) highlighted the extent of the relational and environmental support that was needed in autistic employees to feel less workplace inequal than their peers. The research on autism therefore seems to be suggesting that workplaces need to do more if autistic staff are to feel equally and adequately supported to develop, acquire, and retain jobs (Harmuth et al., 2018).

As part of a recent wave of scholarship suggesting a way out, calls for employment support for marginalized staff groups are emerging (Hedley et al., 2017; Buescher, et al., 2014; Hendricks, 2010). Recently Spoor et al. (2020) acknowledged that organizations need to do more to support autistic employees (also see Bury et al., 2021). Recently, calls for such types of support have even been extended to families of autistic people (Rose et al., 2022). Despite these calls for more positive actions such as boosting the psychosocial competencies of autistic people in order to deal with their sensory and social challenges, the extent to which their resilience is developed at the organizational level remains sparingly investigated (Luthar et al., 2006). There has been negligent attention and practical focus on how to address the inequality experienced by autistic people from an individual, emotional, and personal behavioral stance (Wright et al. 2014; Kaboski et al., 2017).

Despite some of the proffered solutions, autistic people continue to experience workplace inequality to the extent that its intensified scale highlights a certain acceptance of treating some marginalized groups more dis-favorably than their most able-bodied colleagues, thereby leading to some researchers the pervasiveness of un-well-being triggered by a hypernormalized inequality (Szatmari, 2018). Such a toxic workplace context has therefore overshadowed previous calls for personal psychosocial, cognitive, and organizational-environmental support for autistic employees (Kaboski et al., 2017). To complement the call to practically address the shortcomings raised by pervasive inequality for autistic people, some scholars are now suggesting that the potential way out may be resilience capability (Shochet et al., 2016), but we do not know how doing so could address the deeper systemic workplace inequality and the traditional approaches used in doing so. To find out how this can be achieved and thereby obtain the chapter's focus, I continue this section

by examining more recent studies into the pervasiveness of workplace inequality through the adoption of specific employment practices followed up with an analysis of a recent UK-based project on autism in the next.

Methodology: An Autistic Jobseekers' Peer Support Case in the UK

Having examined the pervasiveness of inequality in a range of autism and inequality research contexts, the challenge versus mitigation approach used, and HRM's role in different countries, I now turn attention to investigate the extent to which Yurchak's notional aspects of 'hypernormalization' (the use of everyday practices to normalize abnormal phenomenon like workplace inequality as if they will last forever) could be observed in a case involving autistic jobseekers in the UK. The sample involved here was about individuals diagnosed with autism, but who were able to work and participate in the support group. However, not all individuals with autism are able to do so. The case was chosen because it highlights and fits the key aspects of inequality that have been depicted in the literature examined earlier (including structural, processes-based, procedural, systemic, and even relation aspects used at organizational and national levels to propagate and maintain a state of inequality and marginalization).

Based on emerging research and the call to support the neurodiverse needs of autistic people, an Autism Work Peer Support Group (AWPSG) was set up with the UK Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) Jobcentre in a UK county. The group comprises of 24 people who were clinically diagnosed with a range of autistic conditions and who had registered with the Jobcentre in a UK county. They also had, between them, a range of employment histories in different jobs, while others were actively looking for but were not fortunate at the time to find employment. Ninety per cent of the group had already achieved some educational qualification from secondary to A-levels, while 10% had Higher National Diplomas (or HNDs) in the UK. The group was also being

supported in their job searches by two disability employment advisors (DEAs), who have had a good working relationship with the group and were therefore understanding of their specialized employment, personal, behavioral, and health needs. These advisors also acted as facilitators at the group's sessions so as to provide vital form, structure, continuity, and familiarity (important aspects needed in any autism support context as found from different autism studies). For example, it was the facilitators' role and responsibility to ensure members had access to session venues and therefore could participate and contribute to a range of activities and discussions at appropriate times and places. The meetings were held at the Department for Work and Pensions premises, which were accessible and safe for all group members who lived in the locality. For details of what was agreed with and provided for group members (see Table 4.1).

The main aim of setting up such a group was to share ideas, frustrations, missed opportunities, and foreseeable job outlets to see the extent to which hypernormalization was internalized by group members. The group was also given the platform to strategize on a range of intervention mechanisms that were designed to address the absurdity of hypernormalized practices, opinions, and viewpoints. A set of questionnaire areas was proposed to the autistic jobseekers to see how they reacted to each item. The questionnaire that was designed focused on aspects such as how well autistic jobseekers were able to communicate their viewpoints, their reactions to facilitators, how they related with other group members, and their use of technology to find work. These questions were meant to foster discussions at such a forum and serve not only as an outlet where

Table 4.1 Support areas and agreements for the autism group

Support areas	Agreements with participants
Peer-to-peer support	Person-to-person assistance within group
Additional support	Bespoke online sessions to boost technological skills
Place	Local Jobcentre
Membership	Autistic jobseekers and mentors
How often	Twice monthly
Session length	Between 1 and 1.5 hours
Focus	Job searches and well-being issues
Facilitation and coordination	Facilitators who had experience in supporting autistic people

communication could be enhanced through the voicing out of each member's opinions on a range of autism and employment-related issues but also for members to examine the extent to which they internalized and were prepared to challenge the literature and research's 'hypernormalization' of autistic people as a subdued, marginalized, and subjugated group. An additional set of questionnaire items focused on the extent to which the autistic jobseekers' participation at the focus group meetings facilitated their socialization, confidence building, attitudinal change, and capability of retaining jobs when they have succeeded in getting one. These questions were asked to find out the individuals' and group's ability to develop resilience over time. Additionally, the discussions were expected to serve as a peer motivation platform given the range of negativities that have been highlighted in previous and current research on autism, employment seeking, and inequality (see Table 4.2 for the specific methodological issues).

Table 4.2 Methodological issues

DWP case issues	Inequality issues in case	Autism issues raised by group facilitators	Focus group guidelines
Issue 1	Adapting to standardized recruitment and selection processes	Have you experienced any difficulties in relation to finding a job?	Jobseekers' internalization of hypernormalized employment practices
Issue 2	Adapting to workplace environments that are not sensitive to autistic people's sensory, emotional, and behavioral needs	How do you view other autistic jobseekers in the support group?	Jobseekers' reactions to the challenges
Issue 3	Not having access to adequate resources	How do you think other jobseekers in the support group see you?	Jobseekers' attitudes to finding work
Issue 4	Not being able to develop and progress as other colleagues without a disability	What is your perception of the online job search platform?	Jobseekers' approach to job retention

Thematic Findings

Four themes have been found from the two sets of questionnaires—firstly, to the autistic jobseekers' responses to the generic questionnaire, whose aspects have been highlighted in the preceding section, and to a second set of questions which sought to ascertain whether resilience building could help alleviate their inequality and marginalization. The resilience questions focused on aspects such as their ability to socialize with friends, their confidence building capability leading to potential job opportunities, and the added benefit of being part of the employment focus group. The themes are presented as follows.

Theme 1: Access to Employment Framework

The first finding highlights the way the group has been put together and implemented. Members spoke about not only how formatted and structured the group's meetings were but also its benefits such as influencing and being influenced by each other's opinions and viewpoints on attempts to find work. They talked about the way they were keen to take part reassured about their safety, sensory, and behavioral requirements being safeguarded within an environment they felt comfortable in. While more than half of the members talked about how their confidence levels were boosted by such meetings, others highlighted that they had begun to observe improvements in the way they interacted with other group members, whom they did not know prior to the meetings and discussions, and others spoke about how their increased awareness of who they are and their limits made them question why they had previously had self-doubts and were low on personal esteem. The latter aspects dented their abilities to interact with people previously and directly or indirectly affected their chances of getting or even keeping a job. Although it is easy for over half of the members to say how wonderful their experience of the group has been in terms of offering them a framework, which they can use to access employment support, there was a deeper underlying issue of trying to develop the socio-cultural and educational prerequisites of the group so as to resist against the stereotypical negativities that they had previously experienced when applying for jobs.

Theme 2: From Economic Exclusion to Social Inclusion

Members also talked openly about how they had begun to develop greater self-appreciation which had increased their desire to make new friends in an expanded social network. Such an ability to increase their social acumen was reflected in continuing their discussions outside of the DWP. In fact, 65% of members agreed that they were able to discuss difficult unemployment and exclusion issues at meetings, whereas 35% strongly agreed to such as possibility. They talked about how they stayed in touch with other group members outside of the formal structure of the group meetings within an informal atmosphere outside the DWP. Such renewed social interactions increased their confidence in applying for more jobs. The members were clearly expanding their personal spaces in which they felt supported and valued, and, in return, they were beginning to appreciate the benefits of feeling included within various groups both inside and outside of DWP. This sense of inclusion was used as their tool to fight against a previous sentiment of being left out/excluded from participating in the economic world of work/employment and skills development.

Theme 3: Overcoming Unemployment Barriers Through Community Belonging

In the third theme, members reflected on how they were constantly faced with barriers to employment and how these were created from a variety of sources, namely, organizations, society, other social networks, and the standardized recruitment and selection procedures which did not cater to their clinically diagnosed requirements. In contrast, 70% of members strongly agreed with being able to talk freely in the focus group meetings, whereas 50% were pleased to participate in the online employment jobs' searches. They began to individually interpret and make greater sense and meaning out of their meetings. A sense of community started to develop in the group. This was highlighted in how group members started to be more open with one another by even sharing their personal secrets that

they were previously nervous of exposing to others outside of their immediate families. They showed a community spirit which they had not had previously and which they said was lacking from their previous attempts at finding work. They now felt human and had a sense of belonging somewhere where their efforts at improving their lives were appreciated. In essence, they were developing a new set of support networks within the initially established focus group. They were now in control of their journey towards employability and could begin to feel less stressed and anxious about its outcomes. The procedural challenges that they had to encounter had started to disappear as their attitudes and perspectives started to become more positive and empowering.

Theme 4: Developing Dynamic Resilience Capability

Developing resilience is the fourth theme. It showed a couple of interesting findings as follows. Firstly, the autistic jobseekers were able to highlight how their challenges to finding work were created mainly by external parties (organizations, procedures, people's perceptions or misgivings about autistic employees, etc.) and that these constraints were not insurmountable. The members also saw the benefits of group discussions and the social connectedness both within and outside of the DWP and the online employment discussions and searches that were enhanced through these networks. They said these measures enhanced their resilience building (including having the capability to 'bounce back' from adversities) and challenge resolution capacity. They started to adopt new and more effective strategies to get out of unemployment and gain wider social acceptance and belonging. In so doing, they realized how unhelpful the HRM policies and procedures they were subjected to when attempting to find work and how resilience capability offered them a new lease of life beyond that of exclusion, marginalization, and even dehumanization. The members began to develop their confidence and 'can-do' spirit through social participation, developing self-esteem, and having a positive outlook.

Four Proposals: Way Out for HRM and Employment Studies

Based on the literature and the thematic findings, I propose four areas for HRM to help address the marginalization and dehumanization that has been created as a result of the application of hypernormalized employment practices onto marginalized communities such as those of autistic jobseekers. These are, namely, (1) a framework shifting from workplace inequality to workplace inclusivity in autism research and for autistic employees; (2) a reconceptualization and rethinking of what the hypernormalization of the absurd application of employment practices means for marginalized communities; (3) a shift from a superordinate organizational and national culture and structure that hypernormalizes absurd practices that dehumanize people to a deeper understanding of the types and levels of support and advice needed by marginalized communities (e.g., jobseekers); and (4) a conscientious development of resilience capability to address workplace inequality, marginalization, and dehumanization.

Proposal 1 identifies an HRM framework shifting from workplace inequality to workplace inclusivity in autism research and for autistic employees. This framework highlights the negativities of applying standardized employment practices such as recruitment and selection's use of prototype job descriptions and person specifications onto *all* categories of potential employees irrespective of age, race, ability/disability, and others. The frame also surfaces the workplace inequality that such an application could lead to and calls for a more common-sensical approach to practice application and contextual sensitivity. The framework is therefore aimed at greater workplace inclusion for marginalized staff. In order to put this proposal into practice, it is necessary for organizations to encourage members to voice out their socio-cultural preferences of what types of employment practices may potentially discriminate or alienate and what types of HRM processes could count as stressors and therefore should be dealt with earlier in the recruitment and selection processes (including before the damage and losses to productivity creep in). Although the examples from the literature highlighted organizations' and HR professionals'

expectations *on* incoming employees (albeit with limited interventionist success), hardly were we enlightened about what effects these perpetuated practices could have on the resilience building potential of employees. The current thinking behind HRM scholarship and practice is that the onus to be productivity-driven, to have a sense of belonging, to fit within organizational operations, and so on is *on* the individual employee. Likewise, the predominant thinking is the challenge-mitigation perspective, which views marginalized employees as a problem rather than a potential part of the solution. Proposal 1 is stating that HRM should work *with* existing and incoming staff to ensure that adhering to organizational structures and procedures is inclusive and non-discriminatory.

Proposal 2 highlights how HRM scholarship and research could benefit from a reconceptualization and rethinking of what the hypernormalization of the absurd application of employment practices means for marginalized communities. The scholarship on autism and inequality highlights the negative impact of employment practices that have adopted a challenge-mitigation approach in their application. It also shows what happens when people who need support (including autistic jobseekers) in activities such as one-to-one guidance and coaching are treated as a challenging, homogenous group with the potential to cause trouble. This signals the need to rethink the challenge-mitigation approach in terms of what type of support is provided *for* such a group and, in so doing, reconceptualize challenge-mitigation to include supporting individuals and groups out of the perpetuation of absurdity via the challenge-mitigation framework. The new proposal includes a tripartite challenge-support-mitigation framework as part of the new reconceptualization of workplace inequality and how it could be addressed. Such a new direction provides a radical rethink of who has the authority to design, implement, and evaluate the effects of HRM practices on staff, who needs to be included in this redesign process, and how personal human development (or PHD) takes center stage rather than the priority accorded to the notion of ‘challenge’ in previous scholarship. My proposal echoes Kuchinke’s (2010) notion of the centrality of human development that would supersede managerial and business leaders’ preponderance to abuse

their power in the challenge-mitigation approach. This new personal human development notion highlights, among other things, the centrality of the individual personal and their development and how these should be guided by a more ethical, moral commitment and values-driven management style that does not always fall back on the more imposition-driven challenge-mitigation approach. The new PHD focuses more on both employees and employers adopting a reciprocal approach to each other's developmental needs. For example, management would need to be supported by autistic staff to understand their neurodiverse workplace needs, whereas autistic staff would need management's support to thrive within increasingly standardized workplace settings. Such a new perspective is better tailored at resolving performance, reward, recruitment, and selection practices which have caused the marginalization-related challenges. Such an environment enhances business firms and people to thrive. Continuing to use hypernormalized practices that only measure traditional constructs of job, organizational and personal attributes, and characteristics in order to be performing employees as recommended by Cooper et al. (2013) will only serve to deal with the challenge posed by autistic staff while discriminating, alienating, and further marginalizing them in wider society (including autistic jobseekers). This thereby severely undermines their career and personal development and attainment and the support and reciprocity of obligations that should be encouraged in my new reconceptualization.

Proposal 3 draws our attention to yet another important shift from a superordinate organizational, national, societal culture and structure that hypernormalizes absurd practices (such as normalizing a neoliberal approach to workplace practices whereby all people have to compete for employment, for rewards and promotion, for recognition, and so on despite their capability or health conditions) to one that treats disabled people with respect and as humans (not objects for organizational use). Similarly, this proposal calls for an HRM-centric approach that uses structural, process-based, and emotive discourses to help deepen understanding of the types and levels of support and advice needed by marginalized communities (including jobseekers). This proposal involves managers undertaking a more critically evaluative approach of the work-

place structures involving how they recruit, select, and performance and reward manage staff, especially those considered marginalized. The new proposal also highlights the need for managers and staff to work together in identifying internal and external processes related to resource utilization, resource hoarding, exploitation, and adaptation practices that may have been inadvertently used by management thereby leading to the perpetuation of workplace inequality and its resultant absurdity. Such an examination calls for a deeper understanding of what workplace inequality actually means to those on the receiving end as it takes into account the context and the jobseekers' experiences of the phenomenon. The earlier challenge-mitigation approach does not allow for such a critical examination and therefore negates the experiences of those adversely impacted by its consequences: marginalized communities like autistic staff. Such an experience transcends the structural mechanisms and the HRM procedures that initially helped to reproduce inequality, focusing on the processes that increase people's abilities to function optimally. Although previous research has identified the negative effects that improper use of an organization's resources could have on organizations and their ability to be sustainable, the widespread neoliberal application of rewarding, compensating, promoting, and recognizing staff ability and performance has failed to alleviate the marginalization and dehumanizing nature of HRM's resource use or hoarding and its adaptation to suit less potentially non-marginalized staff communities in reward and performance management processes. Therefore, the instrumentalization of the challenge-mitigation approach only perpetuates autistic employee-employer inequality as it surfaces greater competition between autistic and non-autistic staff. Such dichotomization is especially harmful for marginalized groups. My new proposal/alternative therefore normalizes understanding and collaboration between autistic, non-autistic, and management staff. It also enhances the judicious and transparent identification and distribution of organizational resources to normalize the humanization of individual and collective contributions.

Proposal 4 underscores how important it is for HRM scholars and practitioners to conscientiously develop resilience capability in their research and professional practice to address workplace inequality, marginaliza-

tion, and dehumanization more than ever before. This fourth proposal is calling for resilience as an alternative to the challenge-mitigation approach that HRM professionals could embed in their corporate and HRM practices when employing people from different backgrounds and experiences. The resilience aspects include identifying and communicating with all potential employees all characteristics of the job that could be perceived and experienced negatively by incoming staff (especially those with some disability), putting into place performance enhancing and stress coping mechanisms into all the HRM procedures, policies, and practices for each individual and, over time, helping to create resilience building communities of practice in the workplace. While previous research has emphasized the importance of workplace performativity through a range of performance and reward mechanisms (e.g., appraisals, performance indicators, reward, and remuneration packages), past studies have missed how placing numeric values on what people contribute within the workplace has individually increased stress, demotivation, and anxiety levels as it also dampened the ability of the entire organizational collective to become more resilient, less marginalized, and better performing over a longer period of time. Therefore, this type of intervention (proposal) is new since it has identified both individual *and* organizational characteristics for everyone's development. Contrary to the challenge-mitigation approach which identifies autistic staff as posing a challenge/risk to organizational development, the resilience approach recognizes human potential as the starting point for organizational success. While Roelvink and Zolkos (2015) highlighted how the embodied forms of emotions can help organizations develop knowledge of which practices can foster their sustainable development, 'affective ontologies' that continue to discriminate, to marginalize, and to dehumanize by treating staff's outputs as objects fail to enhance collective resilience building capability. Such failure has been perpetuated by the challenge-mitigation approach and exacerbates workplace inequality. Furthermore, its adoption has dampened HRM's capability to resolve inequality and marginalization in workplaces. Proposal 4 now calls for the identification of these negativities as part of a resilience building process in HRM (see Table 4.3 for a comparative analysis of theories examined, this chapter's four proposals, and how hypernormalization has been extended).

Table 4.3 Comparative analysis between theorization and four proposals

Inequality theory perspectives	Hypernormalization perspective	Autism research perspectives	Chapter's four proposals	Extension of hypernormalization and future research
Tilly's (1998) relational perspective	Yurchak's (2003, 2013) paradoxical depiction of an unreal eternity	Baldwin et al.'s (2014) autistic over-representation in unemployment	Designing and implementing tailored recruitment and selection, job descriptions, and person specifications should include all staff	A focus on people's perceptions of what counts as workplace inequality Highlighting practical resolutions to inequality and marginalization Future research should examine how employees' perceptions of inequality have been hypernormalized in informal, non-workplace settings
Glenn's (2002) race, class, gender, and income disparity perspective	Difference between ideological pronouncements and practice/reality	Burgess and Cimeria (2014) unfriendly recruitment and selection practices Cooper and Kennady (2021) recruitment and selection challenges for autistic applicants		

(continued)

Table 4.3 (continued)

Inequality theory perspectives	Hypernormalization perspective	Autism research perspectives	Chapter's four proposals	Extension of hypernormalization and future research
Munoz's (2008) resource control and exploitation perspective	Façade of stability, predictability, and replicability, and security for all	Kaboski et al. (2017) emotional, personal, and behavioral challenges for autistic people		<p>A recognition of the power of resource allocation and its impacts in shaping human behavior</p> <p>Dealing with environmental stressors that trigger staff's and jobseekers' 'ontological insecurities' and societal marginalization</p> <p>Future studies should examine how 'ontological insecurities' can be investigated within autism, inequality, and employment studies</p>

Le Grand and Talin's (2013) organization and categorization of work perspective	Normalization of absurd practices in workplaces and society in general	Sheridan's (2018) gender pay gap challenges for disabled staff	Organizing work and workplace environments through common-sensical and non-binary/polarization approach Staff's requirements and needs should be central in workplace inequality studies Future studies should look into the combination of much wider societal, organizational, and employees' qualitative responses to inequality and marginalization
Vallas' (2012) labor market segmentation and attribution of specific value and rewards perspective	Rational practices are replaced with and normalized by irrational/absurd practices	Gal et al.'s (2015) communication barriers for autistic staff	

(continued)

Table 4.3 (continued)

Inequality theory perspectives	Hypernormalization perspective	Autism research perspectives	Chapter's four proposals	Extension of hypernormalization and future research
Srivastava's (2019) and Lopez-Roldan and Fachelli's (2021) external influences on organizational structures and jobs' categorization perspective	Replication and maintenance of societal 'truths,' rituals, organizing structures, and modes of expression	Lopez and Keenan (2014) sensory and social challenges for autistic staff		Challenging organizational rituals, customs, and cultures leading to inequality and marginalization of autistic people Highlighting the role of hierarchical forms in the reproduction of exclusion Highlighting how the adoption of standardized HR practices has led to inequality and marginalization reproduction Future studies should examine how staff members' beliefs, customs, and preferences may have also reproduced workplace inequality

Jin's and Lee (2017) social class structural differences perspective	Polarization between meaningful and meaningless	Waisman-Nitzan et al.'s (2021) workplace mal- adaptations for autistic staff	Reconceptualizing and rethinking the meaningfulness of employment practices and workplace environment for autistic staff and the marginalized in society	Recognizing the meaninglessness of standardized recruitment, selection, pay, and reward and performance appraisals Future studies to focus more on a shift towards HR practices with meaning
Li et al. (2018) and Witt and Redding (2014) state institutionalization of workplace and societal inequality perspective	Polarization between illusion and reality	Wood and Happe's (2020) overall unfriendly work environment	Challenging neoliberal application of reward, compensation, promoting, and staff recognition and performance through equitable resource identification, allocation, and distribution, and usage	Institutionalizing a workplace norm based on people's internalization of what it means to feel valued, respected, and treated equally Future studies should examine a comparative analysis of value and meaning creation as mitigators against inequal and marginalized treatment in workplaces and society

(continued)

Table 4.3 (continued)

Inequality theory perspectives	Hypernormalization perspective	Autism research perspectives	Chapter's four proposals	Extension of hypernormalization and future research
	Polarization between official and unofficial rule and language	Szatmari's (2018) pervasive autistic lack of well-being in workplaces	HR to identifying appropriate well-being measures that are realistically communicated to enhance employees' performance and longer-term resilience	Building resilience into organizational entities through employee learning and development Enhancing workplace adaptation through a language of tolerance, dignity for all, and inclusivity Future studies should ask fundamental questions on processes of relationality, dignity enhancement, and strategic resilience

Conclusion and Recommendations

Autism research has not previously been investigated and presented in terms of how the use of employment practices such as recruitment, selection, reward, and performance management has led to a perpetuation of inequality within the workplace and wider society. The absurdity that this normalization has created has led to a fundamental void, which is how to address workplace inequality through a reconceptualization of the inequality and the dehumanization felt by marginalized communities such as autistic jobseekers. After a critical examination of autism research and anchoring this chapter on the theoretical framework of inequality theory, a deeper understanding of the extent to which inequality and marginalization may have been perpetuated in different organizational contexts and national/societal environments has been achieved. An examination of inequality research and literature within various organizational and societal contexts has revealed that HRM has been, for far too long, preoccupied itself with developing procedures and mechanisms that have successfully served a range of organizations' performance and financial objectives while, simultaneously, robbing individual employees, collectives, and marginalized communities of their individuality, respect, dignity, and humane employment conditions. Over time, such research has become mainstream and has led to what Yurchak called the hypernormalization of absurdity (including the unquestioning adoption of standardized recruitment, selection, and performance practices) to the extent that the unquestioning development and adoption of such practices have maintained, stabilized, and perpetuated an organizational and even national culture of inequality and marginalization of vulnerable communities (including autistic jobseekers). This has therefore led to this chapter's recognition of a rethinking of the blanket application of the challenge-mitigation approach that has, over the decades, been used to address challenges posed to organizational development by marginalized groups such as autistic employees.

As part of a new way out, I have proposed four areas in which HRM should step up its responsibility to help address the inequality and marginalization experienced by the autistic community of jobseekers in my focus group. Doing so will help to resolve the application of standardized

workplace processes and procedures, including the hiring processes, that have been hypernormalized in workplaces. By using the experiences of a focus group of autistic jobseekers to study a marginalized community, the novel set of four proposals includes an HRM framework that identifies the negative issues felt by autistic people when an organization's resources are applied in ways that were anticipated to satisfy the traditional challenge-mitigation approach in HRM scholarship. The new four-pronged framework also highlights the need to shift the discourse from national (macro-level), organizational, and cultural systems that treated marginalized groups disrespectfully and inhumanely to one that focuses on improving their personal and professional well-being and personal human development and finally developing resilience capability for individuals and communities at the micro level. These proposals serve as a practical way forward for HR professionals to address the structural inadequacies and the normalization of personal and organizational underdevelopment (see Bechter et al. 2017; Heyes et al., 2018). They also address the challenge-mitigation processes (see Tilly, 1998) that have perpetuated workplace inequality. Future studies should examine and critique frameworks that develop sustainable resilience for other marginalized and vulnerable communities.

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5

'Chocolates for the Director' and Other Tales of Public Sector Absurdity

Introduction (Wstep)

There are many methodological approaches to getting under the skin of organizational life. I consider myself an organizational ethnographer. Ethnography is a qualitative approach typically applied within the social and behavioral sciences, stemming from the field of Anthropology, enabling us to expand our understanding of how societies and groups function (e.g., Geertz, 1973). I gather rich multisource data towards my research—I interview members of organizations and teams; I analyze documents, policies, and artifacts; and I observe what goes on day to day, taking ethnographic field notes. This means that I have had many opportunities to study organizations to gain a deep insight as to their functioning, their processes and people dynamics, in much the same way that anthropologists traditionally study human groups and their cultures. One of our 'tools' if you like is our capacity for reflexivity. Reflexivity denotes the ability to take into account the impact of my presence on what I am researching and on the research process itself (see Scotford Archer, 2012). I therefore approach the writing of this chapter from the reflexive standpoint—reflecting on arguably absurd situations from my

past work in the English public sector, namely, the National Health Service (NHS) and Higher Education Institutions (HE), and my role within them.

There is also an element of autoethnography within this chapter in order to connect my own personal experience with my socio-cultural context. Autoethnography is conducting ethnography of self and understanding one's own self-cultural and contextual facets, utilizing self-reflection, reflexivity, and one's own subjective experience (see Ellis, 2004). It is therefore apt that I have chosen to draw on Sławomir Mrożek's satirical work 'Chocolates for the Director' (2019 edition) (original *Czekoladki dla Prezesa*). My formative childhood years were spent in Soviet-era Poland. I recently recollected the painful absurdity of the censorship of my mother's letters sent to eight-year-old me from London with Black marker. Blanked out clauses I imagine expressing her immersing herself in the bourgeois excess of the West—'today, I visited a supermarket to find shelves filled with food'; 'I arrived at the local council offices and was served immediately with a smile'; 'I took a ride on the metro which had actually once been built'—expressions of a life in direct contrast to the absurd social and infrastructural inefficiencies of Communist Poland. Mrożek (1930–2013) was a satirist, journalist, dramatist, and cartoonist. Many of his works are classified as absurdist fiction or the theater of the absurd. This genre typically focuses on the nihilist experiences of its characters, whereby there appears to be no inherent meaning to their existence. Mrożek's characters often find themselves within absurd and incongruous scenarios, typically offering no way out and steeped in futility.

One of Mrożek's most famous works, the play *Tango* (1964), offered me a powerful lens through which to understand my early childhood experiences. I studied the work for my Polish A-Level (it did feel somewhat oxymoronic to be undertaking an English school qualification in my native tongue, studying a literary culture that was my own, and yet from an outsider's perspective—perhaps here my initiation into ethnography began). *Tango* (2017 edition) presents us with a multi-generational household on stage (termed a micro-society by a number of literary commentators), in conflict, with Artur, a medical student, in vain attempting to establish a values-based system for organizing the household. Here, the

teenage me, I saw parallels with what I perceived to be the empty gestures and propaganda of Soviet Russia and how at odds it was with my daily experience of food stamps, queueing, and the surveillance my family risked being under by being anti-Party academics—'and remember not to talk about politics at school' heard the seven-year-old me. *Tango* raised the question of whether the intellectual class as symbolized by Artur has any place in modern society. Not long before writing this chapter, Michael Gove (a Conservative Party Minister and at the time the Secretary of State for Justice in the UK) discredited experts during the 2016 Brexit referendum with the words 'I think the people in this country have had enough of experts.'

However, I chose to focus on Mrožek's lesser-known and more recent work 'Chocolates for the Director' (1992). The rationale for choosing this collection of satirical short stories, published in the satirist's later years, is manifold. The work has not yet been translated into English, and I make an amateurish attempt to do so myself within this chapter being no translator, but I do so I hope in ode to the author to begin to open up access to 'Chocolates for the Director' to a wider audience. Even the book title is my own translation. The work, seemingly inspired by the farce of the Soviet-era, is a scathing criticism of institutional life and the contemporary workplace in all its absurdity, which of course is directly aligned with the premise of our present book. The meaningless scenarios that Sławomir Mrožek satirizes point towards the hypernormalization of absurdity which my co-authors explore in great detail—namely, how solving the complexity of the real world and all its challenges and intractable 'wicked' problems, such as climate change, human exploitation, and corruption, has been traded for a simpler fake Potemkin village smoke-screen, thus reinforcing the maintenance of an obedient and naïve populace and upholding the power of corporate elites and other ruling oligarchies. A Potemkin village, named after Prince Grigory Potemkin who built a fake village to impress Empress Catherine II, refers to a construction with the purpose of providing an external façade of success, to mask the undesirable reality of its true form.

Finally, but by way of an introduction, this chapter can be conceptualized as stemming from critical institutional and literary analysis. Critical institutionalism promotes and contributes to the body of knowledge

concerning institutional relational processes, the distribution and utilization of both human and non-human resources, and the institution's interrelationship with its societal context (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). I draw on autoethnographic experiences of institutional life pertaining to these facets which are of central interest to critical institutionalism. Literary analysis scaffolds the present chapter, through the application of Sławomir Mrożek's 'Chocolates for the Director' as a lens of elucidating the absurdity of institutional processes with the English public sector. As an ethnographer, my subjective experience of the work and my own personal perspectives, along with a critical evaluation of Mrożek's work, are of central interest. Each of the following sections is named after selected chapters of 'Chocolates for the Director.'

The Hat (Kapelusz)

My numerous head of programs, projects, and services interim management roles in the NHS entailed taking part in countless meetings. I cannot recall a meeting where the Pareto 80/20 principle had not reared its head, namely, that the last 20% of the meeting was spent discussing matters holding 80% significance, whereas 80% of meeting time was spent on discussing the lesser 20% of issues. And the 20% often involved car parking or printing pitfalls. Indeed, one of the often-cited concerns within the NHS is how to manage 'waste' within the system. 'Waste,' according to Chris Ham at the King's Fund (2017), can denote a number of facets of organizational life and its impact, such as 'adverse events, spending on medical procedures of low value, and the use of branded medicines when equally effective generic alternatives are available.' It was during my time with the NHS where general practitioner (GP) referrals to other NHS services began to be more actively scrutinized for their appropriateness in order to reduce 'waste' in the system. This saw general practitioners—the medical generalist NHS 'gatekeepers' whose role was traditionally to support the control of healthcare expenditure through 'authorizing' access to specialty care—being 'gatekept' through standardized 'one-size-fits-all' criteria by externally commissioned referral management teams (Royal College of General Practitioners, 2018). Though

proponents of the referral management systems argued that they offered additional 'peer-review' and guidance around the appropriateness of referrals, upholding quality of care and providing value for money, somewhat absurdly, the teams assessing the referrals were often made up of the same local GPs employed at higher cost to the taxpayer by externally procured private providers making the referral decisions in the first place. Arguably, this duplicated the use of human resource, paradoxically creating wastage in the system and risking the deprofessionalization of general practitioners (e.g., Weiss & Fitzpatrick, 1997) by their own colleagues undermining their clinical expertise in decision-making. Despite scant evidence as to their effectiveness in driving improved referrals and quality of clinical decision-making, within government policy, referral management centers were nonetheless promoted as a symbol of efficiency and cost-saving to the taxpayer, driving the hypernormalization of an inherently absurd organizational ritual.

To draw parallels with 'Chocolates for the Director,' within the chapter 'The Hat,' Sławomir Mrożek uses the hat as a symbol for a Potemkin bureaucracy—one that has an outwardly facing semblance of civility and professionalism, but merely as a Scheinian artifact (referring to Edgar Schein's (1992) conceptualization of organizational culture), yet one that holds no bearing on the underlying reality of institutional performance. Officials are mandated by the Director to wear the hat when making their way through the town on official business. The Director informs his workforce that he 'purchased the hat through official funds.' The hat is described in comedic detail, as being 'of the Borsalino make, in the shade of marengo, manufactured from the highest quality felt' (p. 135) and kept in the Director's wardrobe under lock and key to prevent it from getting dusty. Soon problems begin to arise, namely, caused by staff having heads of different shapes and sizes. This literal 'one-size-fits-all' institutional approach results in the Director receiving the following anonymous complaint from the senior clerk—'from a hygienic standpoint, it is my responsibility to report that the junior clerk has dandruff' (p. 136). And so a meeting is called, though the case of the senior and junior clerk is overshadowed by a more 'important' 20% Pareto event, namely, that the senior accountant, while on official business in town, was not only not wearing the hat, but was found to have been fanning

himself with it. The senior accountant's justification that he was simply hot does not excuse his wrongdoing in the eyes of the Director, for the hat remains 'the property of the State' (p. 137) (Fig. 5.1).

Here, Mrožek elucidates several absurdities of public sector institutional life, utilizing the tangible symbol of 'the hat' and hat wearing to convey the organizational façades which take up space in lieu of meaningfully contending with complex and challenging work. Further, the somewhat farcical passive aggressive reports on colleagues as in the case of dandruff are reminiscent of the use of Datix reporting, an electronic incident reporting system, within NHS organizations. I spent several years working in forensic mental health settings, where several high-risk events, including the assault of my team member by another staff member within a forensic unit, mandated the completion of an online Datix form. No matter how 'objectively' serious the incident I was reporting had been, never had I received a response from the 'higher ups' as to next steps nor how learning would be generated from the incident towards the prevention of future issues. It was as if 'Datixing' (yes, the new verb 'to Datix' has entered the NHS vernacular) had become an end in itself rather than the means to an end it was designed to be. 'Just put it on Datix' I was often told. This apparently universal advice then led to insurmountable volumes of Datix incident reporting within the NHS Trust. Further, the Datix process has been 'exposed' on Twitter by Shaun Lintern (2020),



Fig. 5.1 A Borsalino felt hat in the shade of marengo

health journalist for *The Independent*, as being weaponized through its use to attack colleagues and other professional groups.¹ Indeed, a mixed methods study of national patient safety incident report in Datix carried out by Cooper et al. (2017) revealed that 45% of reports attributed blame to an individual, potentially reflecting an organizational culture in health which leads to retribution, rather than one of learning, along with 'a failure to appreciate the contribution of system factors,' undermining the original purpose of the incident reporting system, namely, to generate learning from incidents about how to avoid them in the future.

The absurdity of incident reporting through Datix within the NHS is often highlighted on #medtwitter. Professor Alison Leary (2022) highlights that the resolution of a Datix report does not denote the resolving of systemic issues in the NHS which pose a risk to patient safety,² such as its present recruitment and retention crisis undermining safe staffing levels. Dr. Gordon Caldwell (2022) tweets about the futility of the Datix process, as engaging with it leads to the creation of 'a new long verbose Policy circulated by email which boils down to "Staff must be more vigilant and more careful and fill in yet another long form."' ³ Again, participation in the process outwardly designed to fix the root of the problem results in the proliferation of tasks which have little bearing on the issue which requires solutions to prevent future incidents.

Mrożek's chapter 'The Hat' ends with the Director being spotted wearing the Bolsarino on a Sunday, in direct contravention of his own policy. He is spotted by one of his employees who is left with the dilemma of whether to 'say "hi" or pretend that he hasn't seen him' (p. 137). We can draw parallels here with the 'Catch-22' or a 'no-win dilemma' of Datix as a feature of NHS institutional life. The term 'Catch-22' refers to Joseph

¹ Lintern (2020), Shaun Lintern on Twitter: 'The weaponisation of NHS incident reporting meant to improve safety is one of the biggest barriers to improving patient safety, culture and workforce engagement. Sorry Eileen, I hope you challenge this.' / Twitter

² Prof Alison Leary ❤️ #ProtectNurse on Twitter: 'Your datix might be resolved but the safety issue has not gone away. No and low harm is the time to tackle safety issues before they become serious issues.' / Twitter

³ Gordon Caldwell on Twitter: '@shaldonangler @sweb68 @NHSwhistleblowr @icureiosity @JanMDavies The outcome of #Datix is usually a new long verbose Policy circulated by email which boils down to "Staff must be more vigilant and more careful and fill in yet another long form" <https://t.co/kpJQcmA301>' / Twitter

Heller's (1961) satirical literary work bearing the same title, where the absurdity of military life and war is unpicked, through the attempts of the central character to complete the demands of military service to be able to return home, which are marked by their futility and paradoxical trappings with no apparent way out. Therefore, does the current application of the Datix system mean staff finding themselves in the dilemma of filling out a Datix form and risk producing more work for themselves with no clear resolution, or do they pass the incident by? In true absurd style, the employee in 'Chocolates for the Director' says 'hi' to the hat-wearing Director, but does so while pretending that he hasn't seen him.

Wolves (Wilki)

Absurd fiction does not provide solutions, nor a resolution; rather it highlights a lack of congruence and inherent meaning in humanity's existence (Cornwell, 2016). Yet for many, the existential threat brought by the COVID-19 pandemic prompted reflection on what constitutes meaning at work. Simultaneously, the context brought with it a spate of absurd rituals and behaviors within the workplace—arguably as a coping mechanism in the face of existential dread. 'Finding meaning' has often been conceptualized as humanity's way of countering the absurd and the futility of human existence. Here we can immerse ourselves in the key premise of existential thought, portraying human existence as fundamentally absurd:

At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them (...) This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity (...) is also the absurd. (Camus, 1942—Myth of Sisyphus)

It can therefore be argued that our search for meaning in a meaningless world in itself gives rise to absurdity. This puts us in a Godotian pattern of behavior, whereby we repeat routines and rituals, which in essence have no culmination, driven only by a vain unrealized hope for the arrival of the new. 'Godotian' relates to *Waiting for Godot*, a 1952 play by Samuel

Beckett which debuted on the stage in 1953, the tragicomic poet, playwright, and novelist, often seen as one of the key figures in absurdist theater. *Waiting for Godot* features two caricatured figures, Vladimir and Estragon, engaging in seemingly meaningless and frustrating discussions and encounters while waiting for Godot to arrive. Godot does not arrive, highlighting the futility of Vladimir and Estragon's ritualistic behaviors as they endure their pointless wait.

Parallels can be drawn with the behaviors we engage in within our workplaces, as well as the rituals and cultures of institutions. The pandemic saw me leave work at several HE institutions for consultancy for a year. My experience of working in HE during the time of lockdown was a sure road to burnout. The worldwide COVID-19 situation gave rise to a body of literature appraising the context of home working and productivity, typically stemming from a desire to ensure office-based productivity is sustained or increased, absurdly in the context of a global pandemic. As we moved our in-person teaching delivery to the online context, attempting to resolve timetabling and technology issues became the central focus of my 'academic' work. The IT infrastructure provided to us was woefully inadequate, and I often found myself moving over from the institutionally mandated software to my own business-based tools so that my microphone connection would even work so that my voice could be registered (arguably a lecturing staple). Alongside this, workload seemingly increased exponentially; in particular the top-down demands to record and document what we were doing took a precedent over the actual doing. What I was already experiencing as a 'teaching mill' pre-pandemic, namely, the marketization of higher education and the need to ensure maximum 'sales and "profits"' (e.g., Molesworth et al., 2011), became a factory belt of online student throughput and form filling to create 'transparency' around our teaching delivery. In 'Wolves,' Mrožek's public sector workers hear wolves approaching. The Director fears for his life and asks someone to volunteer themselves as prey for the wolves to save others (face-to-face teaching in the middle of a pandemic anyone?). As no one comes forward, he offers them a pay rise and a state-funded funeral, until he has a willing volunteer. The volunteer rejects the offer of the funded funeral as he says that 'the wolves will already see to that' (p. 151), but the Director who had hoped that the pay rise would have

also been rejected on the basis of the recipient being dead bends under the pressure of the approaching wolf pack to pay out a bonus.

As previously mentioned, a notable facet of the HE pandemic organizational response was that empty performance and work volume and output metrics proliferated more than ever. My own PhD was an ethnographic study of general practices in England that had been labeled as poor performing as a result of their scores on a pay for performance quality improvement scheme called the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QoF) introduced in the early 2000s (Kordowicz, 2016). My thesis was a critical commentary on the limitations of numerical targets as a lens for assessing quality of care, and here I was being mandated to evidence measurable activity above meaningful and nuanced scholarship. Within ‘Chocolates for the Director,’ a meeting is called to discuss the submitted case of poor staff punctuality as to whether another meeting ought to be called to discuss staff punctuality. The meeting to discuss staff punctuality is then called and new punctuality targets set. We observe Mrožek utilizing the literary device absurdity to convey the irrationality of performance targets in the workplace. For a review of target ‘gaming’ or manipulation in the Soviet bloc, see Christopher Hood’s work (2006), which we then applied to the distortion of performance achievement in primary care (Kordowicz & Ashworth, 2010). The workers, suitably impressing the Director, set even more and more ambitious targets for themselves until they decide to begin work at 4 am, becoming caught in the enactment and hypernormalization of ever more absurd workplace behavior.

The comedic is rarely far from the tragic. As colleagues in HE passed away from COVID-19, their obituary circular emails contained disclaimers assuring other staff that ‘there is no evidence to indicate that they contracted COVID-19 whilst undertaking work at the university.’ It became clear that fears of litigation and students claiming back their fees, rather than public health and human compassion concerns, became the main driving forces underpinning the HE top-down pandemic response. Like Artur in Mrožek’s *Tango*, I felt demoralized, disempowered by the systemic structures I found myself part of, and could no longer fit many of my own values into much of my teaching work. To add insult to injury, Michelle Donelan, who served as Minister of State for Higher and Further

Education during the pandemic lockdowns, would demonstrate continued disdain for lecturers 'refusing' to teach students in person despite evidence-based public health pandemic control measures. She also highlighted the 'deeply irresponsible' University and College (trade) Union calling for strikes to improve the working conditions of university workers. As my colleagues were working all hours to support their students while tending to their caring responsibilities at home during lockdowns, I still recall reading Donelan's virtue signaling tweets in total disbelief as representing an HE context that for me working within the HE context did not exist. In a similar vein, my ethnographic research at the time exploring a general practice quality improvement scheme captured the camaraderie, adaptability, hard work, and patient-centeredness of general practitioners, at what was for many the most challenging time of their careers. And yet here is a 2020 headline from *The Telegraph*: 'lazy doctors are using Covid-19 as an excuse to not see us'⁴—'yes, to prevent the spread of a deadly virus' I screamed into the ether. The NHS is facing the worst staffing crisis in its history due to continuous underfunding, poor long-term workforce planning, and Brexit, including exceptionally high rates of staff burnout, turnover and low morale, and the media and Secretary of State for Health continued to malign and scapegoat general practitioners to the point of farce.

Further, recruitment and promotion freezes across the HE sector during the initial waves of the pandemic in England contributed to my colleagues fearing for their professional futures and adopting a 'head down' strategy, becoming pawns within the tsunami of feverish faux productivity. Though from a non-HE context, a PhD study of hiring freezes (supposedly a strategy to improve organizational functioning) within the mining industry (Nzuza, 2020) demonstrates the extent of their negative impact on worker behaviors and therefore on the organization itself—causing a 'distortion of work roles, overworking of the employees, employee dissatisfaction, low morale, low motivation, and negative attitude about the organisation.' I certainly conveyed these attitudes at the time. Conversely, during Poland's Soviet era, everyone had a job. My granddad said to six-year-old me that this is why the Warsaw metro won't

⁴'Lazy doctors are using Covid-19 as an excuse to not see us'—*Telegraph* readers on local GPs.

get built unless we have a democracy and explained that this is why I would on my daily walk to school I would spot workmen sitting around drinking vodka. The Polish saying goes ‘czy się stoi, czy się leży, dwa tysiące się należy’ (‘whether you’re standing up or lying down you’re entitled to your two thousand’—I promise the prosody of the Polish language original has greater comedic impact!), indicating that no matter the quality of your contributions at work, you would get paid, due to the guaranteed income within Soviet bloc Poland. It turns out that the menacing sound of wolves was simply the growling of a colleague’s stomach after eating too many cornichons. Nonetheless, he not only comes away with his life intact, but also an unprecedented cash bonus.

The Lift (Winda)

To conclude, there is no way out of hypernormalization. Or so absurd fiction would have us believe, and after all, in Camusian terms, ‘fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth.’ ‘Chocolates for the Director’ offers no solutions and no hope. The public sector workers in the book remain caught in cycles of absurdity and empty sycophantic behavior, symbolized through the act of gifting chocolates. No doubt, my own futile attempts of looking for meaning in this pointless existence through ethnography are akin to this, but I would hope more to my favorite box of nutty Ferrero Rocher. I hope at least that I have presented ethnographic reflexivity through autoethnography as a useful field of enquiry, helping to elucidate just some of humanity’s organizational and socio-cultural pitfalls, and existential crises. One day, the Director announces that ‘an important investment is taking place, we are going to get a lift.’ Initially, this is met with surprise, given that the department’s offices housed on the ground floor. ‘Never mind’—exclaims the Director—‘this is innovation’ (p. 50). Perhaps, one day I can write a chapter on the fallacy of innovation in the public sector and offer no solutions there either.

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6

The Hypernormalization of Race in Contemporary Workplaces

Western Thoughts and Its Contradictions on Race

Western philosophical and sociological literature is filled with the idea of equality, liberty, freedom and justice, and so on. This also pervades modern business and management literature and the Western—centric textbooks in the field. We shall not cover the full spectrum of Western thought on the issue of equality in this chapter. However, we shall focus on a number of key seventeenth- and eighteenth-century systems of thoughts that shaped the narrative and legal framework about equality and diversity in Europe and the Western world that derived from its conquests. In this context, we consider the thoughts of Montesquieu, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Descartes.

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western philosophy, thinkers such as Montesquieu, Thomas Hobbes and Montes occupied the center stage. Speaking about equality, Montesquieu (2011 originally published in 1783) argued that all men are born equal and should remain so thanks to the protection of the law. This extraordinary thought that sits in sharp contrast with the political system of the time (feudal system) was a novel

and provocative idea that spread rapidly throughout Europe and the Western world. It is believed that the constitution of the USA and the perspectives on civil liberties and freedom are largely inspired by Montesquieu's work. Rousseau (2014) equally believes that man is born free. His seminal work has inspired many freedom movements in Europe and the West more broadly.

In the English-speaking world, Thomas Hobbes is credited for being one of the most influential social reformers and philosophers of the eighteenth-century era. It is important to note that Hobbes himself was a seventeenth-century thinker, but the significance of his philosophy is lasting and dominates the eighteenth century. In his *The Social Contract*, Hobbes emphasized equality between all peoples and between men and women. He asserted that all are part of the social system and can take charge or be subjects at some point in time. Hobbes's ideas reiterated the emerging narrative about the natural freedom that all humans on the planet should enjoy unreservedly.

With these philosophers, we have the foundation of freedom and liberty in Europe and the Western world. Their seminal works have inspired many freedom movements in Europe and the West more broadly. For example, the French revolution of the 1800s cannot be divorced from the philosophy of Montesquieu and Rousseau. Equality and diversity thinking in the UK and the USA is linked to the work of Hobbes. In fact, the British philosopher contended that all humans have an ascribed right to compete for acquisition of resources and to defend themselves. This early idea of equality laid the foundations of thinking about individual rights central to Western capitalist societies and democracies. Only by acknowledging this diversity can humans be happy (Tucker, 2016). More significantly, the mottos of many of the most prominent so-called democratic countries such as the USA, the UK, and France draw directly from these philosophical thoughts, for instance, in the USA it is 'In God We trust,' and in the UK it is 'Dieu et Mon Droit' (paradoxically written in French and meaning God and My Right). In France one speaks of One and indivisible France with the motto 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité' meaning Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

However, the Western political systems and world international relations driven by the West at the time were not commensurate with the

grand narratives about trust in the fair and non-discriminatory God. However, the exclusion of minorities in much of the Western hemisphere is at odd with the explicit reference to the one loving God in the British and American constitutions. The reality of Western society throughout the centuries has defied the philosophical views and national mottos which profess an elusive equality and freedom. These narratives sit right at the heart of a 300-year-long slavery movement and subsequent Western oppression (colonization) of the nations outside of Europe. The violent oppression of the colonized and the indoctrination of the masses has shaped the attitudes towards minorities in Western societies leading to the inferiorization of these minorities in most spheres of life, including work and employment, education, housing, health, and access to political power. Abrams et al. (2015) talk of hypocrisy. We can speak of Western hypocrisy about equality and diversity because of unequal application of human rights, whereby the balance of equality tips in favor of one group (White) to the detriment of others. These will have dramatic and lasting consequences for postcolonial workplaces, for example, equality and diversity in employment opportunities as well as promotions within work. Evidence suggest that White male have a disproportionately wider representation in top jobs in organizations and government (Tomaskovic-Devey & Hoyt, 2019; Mooney, 2017). We consider these contradictory narratives and practices in the next paragraph. We also draw on the critical voices from the oppressed world, such as those of Frantz Fanon and more recent scholars such as George Ayitteh, Miles and Anthias and Yuval-Davis who denounce the normalization of disadvantage and Western hypocrisy.

The Contradictions

Postcolonial theory of race examines impact of colonialism and the ensuing so-called globalization on race relations. Therefore, postcolonial theory of race relations in its historicity sheds lights on its ongoing ramifications for societies generally and employment relations more specifically. The legacy of colonialism has been significantly theorized in the sociological literature.

Authors such as Phizacklea and Miles (1980) argue that the complexities of labor and race relations have their roots in the migration that followed colonialism. During the two world wars, people from the colonies were drafted into the battle zones, helping to save Western nations from Nazi Germany. And in the aftermath of the wars, particularly the Second World War, labor shortages to rebuild postwar Europe mean that once again, the colonized were called upon to help Europe. However, in all these calls, the significant labor areas filled by the foreign and migrant labor were largely menial and labor-intensive work roles (Hack-Polay et al., 2021). The narrative, here again, was that the non-European labor force was needed, but in reality it was largely for unfulfilling and hazardous positions that no one wanted to undertake. This is an exemplification of how inequalities in early diverse labor relations were set in sharp contrast with the ideals of equality and fairness advocated in Western thoughts and political narratives. The ideals of equality and fairness pertained to the ingroup and in the silence, groups such as women and non-Whites were excluded. For instance, the Chinese immigrants in Liverpool (England) were largely confined to jobs in shipyards, cleaning cockpits (Chiang, 2021; Broady, 1955); the Caribbeans were employed in coal mines (Sutherland, 2006) and the Africans mainly in cleaning and domestic jobs. Clearly the labor force in postwar and postcolonial Europe was segregated.

These segregation practices were neither accidental nor isolated. As explained earlier, they were ideologically constructed through imperialism and colonization. Fanon (2004) saw colonization as hypocrisy and a machine for violence from the very nations that claimed to be democracies and which profess nonviolent approaches. This led Ayitteh (1992) to decry the betrayal of Africa [and by ricochet the colonized world] through the Western colonial enterprise, which was largely aimed at removing dignity from the colonized, humiliate them and exploit them. In most cases these practices were state-sponsored by the very political establishments that professed equality and diversity (Carter et al., 1987). Segregation ideas were prevalent in British postwar political narratives. As an example, in 1968, the British Health Secretary, Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech explicitly expressed the undesirability of non-White people in British society. He claimed that non-Whites will corrupt the purity

of British race and culture (Hickson, 2018). Enoch's speech is still relied on by British White supremacist movements to justify acts of violence against minorities in the UK and the USA (Webb, 2015; Langlois, 2021, *The Washington Post*) and the denial of Black vote in the USA. Segregation and slavery movements were legislated during colonial times with royal ascent. These were abolished in 1863 only after all major colonial powers had done so, thus showing the attachment of the West for the very equality that their eminent philosopher and constitutions have professed for centuries (Hickson, 2018, Drescher, 1994). The spirit of segregation has since not disappeared in the Netherlands, where Rose (2022) still found that in the twenty-first century Black women face stiff discrimination. Thus, clearly ethnic labor was not equal to White labor, leading Anthias and Yuval-Davies (2005) and many other authors to conclude that Western nations used migrants as a reserve army of labor. 'Reserve' means no equal access to desirable jobs. Where some non-White workers landed in seemingly supervisory positions, the lack of respect and unequal pay were key features of their tenure.

Institutional Racism: Culmination to Hypernormalization

In recent year key debates have emerged over the notion of systemic racism and its existence. It is generally thought that racism flourishes in times of hardship (Weil, 1991), where racial selection in terms of access to resources is more prevalent. The recent period of hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has not been an exception. Racial debates, in particular around health inequalities and socioeconomic disadvantage, have intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic period. This period has seen a resurgence and significant surge in racial tensions, particularly as affecting minority ethnic groups. Though some in the political and media sector acknowledge that there may be some organized discrimination against minorities, others in the same circles have persistently refuted the existence of systemic racism. This attests to the normalization of discrimination. In this section, I examine the meaning of the concepts and provide some clues as to what might constitute systemic racism.

Defining 'Systemic'

Let us first unpack the meaning of the term systemic (or sometimes used interchangeably with the term systematic). The Oxford English Dictionary [OED] (2022) defines the term systemic as a fact or phenomenon 'relating to a system, especially as opposed to a particular part.' Considering the phrase 'relating to a system,' one can start to think about particular social systems (if we consider a given collectivity as a social system). The second part of the Oxford definition, 'as opposed to a particular part,' also gives us some clues as to how systemic could be understood. This second part of the definition signifies that a systemic phenomenon or action runs through the structures of the collectivity with little exceptions. Sociologist Auguste Comte (1929) perceives system as an integrated whole which means that what happens in a part of the whole affects other parts of that whole. Comte argues that a critical condition to maintain the system in good order and for it to progress is for each element to cultivate more altruism (Durkheim, 1895), which signifies working harmoniously with the other parts.

Case Supporting the Hypernormalization of Systemic Racism

Now returning to the notion of systemic racism, how does it meet the conditions of systemic proposed in the Oxford definition and in Comte's theorization. Both in the USA and the UK as well as most countries struggling with racism, there is a sense that racism touches all spheres of society: employment, healthcare, policing, education and government and the justice system, and so on (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018). Let us consider some of these areas in more depth to elucidate the case.

In education and employment, for instance, there have been countless reports on how racial disadvantage is prevalent in British and American schools. In both countries, the underperformance of Black and minorities is well documented. In the UK, the unemployment rate for these minorities has been consistently more than twice than their majority counterparts for decades, currently standing at 10% compared with just 4% for the

White population. This sustained minority disadvantage in education and employment has led Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1995) and Miles & Phizacklea (1977) to speak of migrants as being a reserve army of labor which is drawn upon only when there is a shortfall in the majority labor force. Hack-Polay (2019) has spoken of the Ghettoization of minorities.

In policing and the justice system, it is well documented that Black and minority people are twice more likely to be arrested (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018) and to receive long-term sentences for petit crimes compared to their White counterparts in the UK and the USA (*ibid.*). The disparities in the way in which the police deal with law and order in different communities have been prominently exemplified in recent years by the killing of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and many other Black and non-White people in the USA; the mishandling of the killing of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence in the UK; the numerous murders of native people in Canada; policy violence against North Africans and Black Africans in France. These high-profile examples represent only the tip of the gigantic iceberg of Black disadvantage in policing and the justice system. In an investigation of the Stephen Lawrence case in the UK, Sir McPherson found that the police force is 'institutionally' racist (Anthias, 1999). This institutionalism of racism has resonance in many other countries and social areas. The attempted insurrection of the Capitol Building in the USA on 6 January 2021 and its light handling by the police and law enforcement forces has been highlighted as further evidence of the color of policing and justice (Broadwater & Fandos, 2021). The majority of the insurgents were White participants and only 50 arrests were made. This sharply contrasts with the mainly Black protest against the killing of George Floyd and against police brutalities where several dozens were arrested, tear gas fired, and the National Guards speedily deployed in great numbers. In reality, the lenient response to the 6 January Capitol Riot was because these 'protesters' were White and therefore handled less harsh (or not prosecuted at all in many cases), which stands in sharp contrast to the military response to nonviolent BLM Movement.

In healthcare, evidence suggests that during the COVID-19/pandemic access to treatment is not color-blind, meaning that Black and minority people experienced less favorable treatment. Most patients who refused the ambulance service to hospital are minorities. At the same time the

number of deaths among healthcare workers disproportionately affected Black and minorities people because they are over-represented in the low-paid end of healthcare jobs which have more exposure to COVID-19 patients.

In government, there is an under-representation of Black and minorities at every level: local government, state/provincial government, and central government. In Britain's history, there has never been a minority prime minister or deputy prime minister. There is no minority leader of a major party and minorities are also under-represented in ministerial positions. In Canada, the first Black leader of the major political party (Green Party) was only elected in 2020 after a century of Canada's existence as country (CBC, 2020). The number of Black members of parliaments and senators is derisory.

The examples can go on and on. We cannot cover all areas of the social system, but these examples show the degree to which the social system displays widespread and embedded disparities in opportunities for various racial groups (DiPrete & Fox-Williams, 2021; Hack-Polay, 2019) in different countries. The evidence of widespread and embeddedness of racial disadvantage meets the first criteria in our established definition of 'systemic.'

Enduring Rhetoric and Structuration Theory

Enduring Rhetoric: Empirical Evidence

A further significant point that supports the case for systemic racism is the temporal endurance in our societies. Despite formulated legal frameworks to protect different races, the social system as a whole has shown a significant inability to work effectively towards equality for all. In the UK, the Race Relations Act was formulated in 1956 but progress towards race equality has been slow. If almost a century since the legal framework came into effect, the debate about race equality is still raging, then there might be significant flaws in the application of the legal framework or its enforcement (Kirton & Greene, 2015). This points to a systemic aspect of the perpetuation of systemic racism. In the USA, since Black people

earned the right to vote in 1867 (Pruitt, 2021), there have been reports of tampering with their ability to exercise this critical right. For instance, recently, some polling stations have been closed without rationale in areas with Black majority, making it difficult for Blacks to vote (*The Guardian*, 2020). And suspicion of systemic discrimination is further reinforced when, at the same time, there is a curb on postal voting which traditionally enabled Black voters whose work patterns did not allow them to present themselves physically at the polling stations to vote.

With the abolition of slavery in 1833 (i.e., that's almost 200 years ago), equality for Blacks and minorities was supposed to abound (National Archives, 2022). However, the difficulties experienced by these groups are emerging as recognized actors in the social structures testify to the fact that there might be a latent drive to maintain them in the former condition (Horowitz, 2019). The voices of minority groups and campaigners are dismissed as conspiracy theory and troublemakers. Thus, arrested, tortured and imprisoned or murdered (Martin Luther King; John Lewis; Malcolm X). Yet, openly declared racist groups such as the British National Party (BNP) and White supremacists in the USA have faced no vigorous action (and have been condoned in some political arenas), perhaps to perpetuate the status-quo in race relations and minority disadvantage. The persistence of race inequalities could be understood through Giddens' (1979) structuration theory. Racial slurs have even been professed by serving prime ministers and presidents, with utter impunity, for example, Boris Johnson, the British Prime Minister, likening the Muslim women wearing hijab to letter boxes (BBC, 2018; Woolley, 2022).

The hypernormalization of racism and inequality in workplaces can be conceptualized through Giddens' (1979) structuration theory. The eminent contemporary British sociologist argues that structure concerns rules and resources. He contends that these are organized in a way that they 'bind time and space in social systems,' and with the persistence in time and space, they develop more independence, thus becoming systemic. This is significant because, as the author puts it, these systems then become 'legitimate' structures embedded in the collective consciousness and are used by social actors (and political actors) to justify their actions. Thus, this becomes 'the essential recursiveness of social life is constituted

in social practices, making structure simultaneously the medium and the outcome of reproduction practices' (p. 81).

In relation to discrimination and inequality, we can therefore conceive that their perpetuation is explained by their developing properties (or structures) that survived the test of time (centuries of Western domination) and space (across the Western geo-political sphere). To argue the case for systematic racism or discrimination in Western workplaces, we have sought to examine Giddens's three tests for the qualification of systemic in his structuration theory: interaction, routinization, and explanation. *Interaction* is the individuals and groups' encounter with the social system, that is, how they internalize and deploy in practice the knowledge and ideologies acquired either normatively or structurally. These could be blurred in time and space but are 'constantly reconstituted within different areas of time-space' (p. 86). Racism and discrimination against the colonized have gone through different phases during the Western conquests and domination and taken different forms as we earlier asserted, for example, from slavery to colonialism, then to neo-colonialism. The second test for establishing the systemic nature of things is *routinization*. Through routinization, social action is institutionalized and gives rise to a social order which inextricably helps to reproduce social frameworks. Finally, there is *explanation*. Giddens views explanation as the articulation of the language to convey the recurrent narratives and ideologies. The author believes that the creation of an accurate syntactic field enables language to be normalized and the stance taken by institutions validated. An example of this can be seen in the papal decree of the [Right of Discovery] which enabled European conquerors to seize land from Native Americans, a practice that was perpetuated for a few centuries as it was legitimized by the courts in the so-called free and democratic world.

Giddens's argument is that the presence of trust and tact is critical for the emergence of ontological security, as well as the organization of social reproduction. However, this trust has dissipated due to Western abuses and volt-face in many situations, for example, the abolition of slavery and its replacement with colonization, the suppression of formal colonization and its replacement with neo-colonialism, and so on. Therefore, each time there is discontent, as opposed to reflecting on the true fundamentals of liberty and freedom and equality embedded in their constitutions,

political systems and core philosophies, Western nations replace an evil system with a more subtle and latent but more vicious system which is more difficult to detect and openly fight to eradicate. When it is discovered, organizations and politicians attempt to water down the systematic nature of discrimination by terming it unconscious, such as in the current fad and buzz phrase unconscious bias. However, in my view, there is hardly anything unconscious in discrimination and disadvantage because they are embedded and inherent in institutions that are consciously crafted (Marx, 1867).

Conclusion

In total, with the statistical evidence available, the protracted period of disadvantage suffered by minorities and the inability of governments to vigorously enforce equal opportunity and diversity legislations, it is difficult to refute the suggestions about the existence of systemic racism. In this article we have substantiated two key parameters that make the claim about systemic or systematic racism compelling: persistence and affecting all areas of the social system and the faintness or lack of political will to address the situation, which clearly reflects structuration theory.

Western civilization has constructed a system that implicitly favors White supremacy (e.g., colonization, neo-colonization, cultural imperialism, and oppression against its own ideology of freedom, democracy, equality, and diversity). Clearly the hypernormalization fits the framework of structuration, with the West initiating *interaction* with the outside world for one purpose (exploitation). To achieve this a complex system of institutionalized social and political actions has been put in place through colonization and neo-colonization (*routinization*). A systematic narrative is constructed (*explanation*) and that undermines and belittles 'others' as undeveloped, uncivilized, or developing countries.

Thus, perhaps the final assumption to explain the persistence of inequalities and racism in Western workplaces and global institutions is simply that the Western centric global institutions and trade relations are constructed around White supremacist ideologies which implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) normalized discrimination and disadvantage against

non-Western people. Giddens (1979) puts that: 'Agents—groups or individuals—draw upon these structures to perform social actions through embedded memory, called memory traces. Memory traces are thus the vehicle through which social actions are carried out.' He continues that '...routinized social practices do not stem from coincidence, but the skilled accomplishments of knowledgeable agents' (p. 26). It is not surprising that Horowitz's (2019) paper found that most Black Americans believe that the abolition of slavery did not bring dramatic material changes to their condition.

The way out of the hypernormalization of racism and race inequality in the workforce is therefore through the reformulation of those institutions that have long flirted with stereotypes, and these include the education system, the political system and popular culture (e.g., film and media). The education system, for instance, could go through a more vigorous decolonization process which will entail the inclusion on inputs from the long silenced voices of the former colonies. Historical accounts, scientific discoveries, and contributions to political thoughts from outside the West require honest acknowledgment. For example, acknowledgment that the popular number system we currently use is made of Arabic digit; that Arithmetics and geometry have significant roots in Egypt, and so on. Acknowledgment of these significant historical facts and crediting them to the rightful inventors from the South would show honesty of the West but also give confidence to the cultures that have been robbed of their heritage. In media, with more globalizing world, it may simply be that governments have to be courageous enough to venture beyond encouraging diversity of faces on our screen to mandate diversity (which is already 'enshrined' in 'inactive' laws).

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7

Hypernormalized Destruction: Making Sense of Why Business Organizations Are Able to Act with Impunity

Introduction

The current system of wealth creation is highly destructive, and the ‘brutality’ of contemporary capitalism leads to ‘catastrophic sufferings of people and the devastation of the environment’ (Baxi, 2010, p. 26). Business organizations are highly successful in creating and accumulating wealth, but this comes at a high cost for society and the environment. Widespread human rights abuse and environmental degradation continues despite attempts to constrain the negative impacts of business activity through legal and regulatory means. Despite the rhetoric of corporate responsibility, abuse of labor rights continues unchecked with multinational corporations implicated in the use of forced labor and modern slavery (Rauxloh, 2007). Corporate-related deaths exceed all other causes of death in the USA with Bittle (2020, p. 132) asserting that ‘corporations frequently kill with impunity.’ Elliot (2021) also argues that corporations continue to violate human rights without restraint or being held to account. Although this problem of the harmful costs of business applies across a whole range of organizational types and sectors, the multinational corporations (MNCs), by virtue of their size and power, have the most significant and harmful impact.

The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013, killing over 1000 garment workers, is a clear example of the human cost of capitalist wealth creation in the contemporary globalized economy (Bohme, 2015). The problem is not just about justice for the survivors and the families of those killed but the fact that the global clothing companies utilizing these supply chains were able to exploit these dangerous conditions for profit and for so long. The Bhopal catastrophe in India in 1984 killed more than 10,000 people when a lethal chemical was released from the Union Carbide plant (Baxi, 2010). Despite this being described as ‘largest peacetime industrial disaster’ (ibid., 2010, p. 32), the Union Carbide corporation and, its successor, Dow Chemicals were never truly brought to account, in fact they continued to thrive and prosper. These individual incidents mask the bigger picture of the damage to health and well-being caused by business- and work-related activity. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there are 2 million work-related deaths every year (WHO, 2021). Long working hours, a direct result of how businesses choose to organize, is linked to 750,000 of these work-related deaths. Businesses and organizations inflict these high levels of harm to human well-being without any meaningful consequence; in other words they are able to act with impunity (Scheffer, 2018). In terms of the existential threat of global warming and climate change, fossil-fuel corporations have continued to create vast wealth with impunity, and governments, despite grand commitment such as the Paris Climate accord, have proved powerless to bring about any meaningful change. The extractive sector in particular generates harm and destruction on such a scale that it threatens our survival as a species (Pensky, 2016). Society appears unable to hold business to account; it can cause harm and destruction without restraint or being held to account—we allow it to act with impunity (Simons, 2012).

Impunity describes the use of power without responsibility. Business organizations act with impunity when they inflict harm but do not receive the ‘legal attention that is due’ (Pensky, 2016, p. 488). This presents an ethical problem and is a source of injustice not only because business organizations can get away with causing harm, but it also has ‘adverse

consequences for broader rule-of-law features that we rightly value' (Pensky, 2016, p. 488). Impunity is about power and the unethical exercise and misuse of power, and when society becomes powerless to act, then impunity threatens democracy itself. The direct cost of this impunity is that it undermines the hope (Reeves, 2019) that is essential for the exercise of the agency to address the destructive and harmful activities of business organizations, particularly the MNCs. Corporate power, and its concentration within a relatively small member of mega corporations, has grown to a level which can exceed the size and power of individual nation states, making it increasingly difficult to restrain and hold these corporate elites to account (Peck & Theodore, 2019). The problem of impunity is not about single acts of illegality, rather it is about the impact of a whole system of legalized impunity. This requires a critique of the destructive nature of the capitalist system and particularly of the current era or phase of capitalism that has widely been described as neoliberalism (Brown, 2015; Brown, 2019; Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017).

This chapter seeks to theorize this harmful phenomenon of business impunity. It will use the concepts of hypernormalization and neoliberalism as the primary analytical lenses. The overall approach will be critical realist, with a concern and focus on the relationship between social structure and social action (Frawley & Pearce, 2007). In this chapter I will argue that the hypernormalized neoliberalism that constitutes the current social structure is the primary cause and enabler of impunity. A society organized along neoliberal lines threatens and undermines moral agency—of businesses to act responsibly and of government and citizens to hold them to account. This situation is absurd, we know the current system is harming society and the environment, but we enable business actors to act with impunity—an act of creative self-destruction (Gould, Pellow & Schnaiberg, 2015). 'Actually existing' hypernormalized neoliberalism resides in and is perpetuated through societal institutions, and we will focus in particular on the institutions of the corporation, the law, and globalization. Neoliberalization of the political economy, it will be argued, is not simply an unplanned evolution of society; rather it has been a deliberate and well-coordinated discourse-shaping, ideological project.

Theoretical Framework

Hypernormalization was a term coined by Alexei Yurchak in his book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2005). He sought to explain the paradox and absurdity of life in the last soviet generation. In this postwar period the state deliberately strove to shape the reality that its citizens experienced, and this was achieved through the production and reproduction of an authoritative ideological discourse that became hyper-normalized (Yurchak, 2006). The hyper-reality created and sustained by this discourse became increasingly detached from reality and without grounding in the lived experience of citizens. The aim was to achieve social control through the promulgation of this single ideology within a bounded domain of meaning. Adam Curtis, documentary film maker, took Yurchak's term and used it as the title of his series of documentary films *Hypernormalisation* (2016). Curtis used the concept to explore contemporary society and its harms and absurdities.

I will use neoliberalism in the sense of a way of describing the nature of the contemporary capitalist system. Neoliberalism is an 'elusive and shape-shifting phenomenon' (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 248), but it is nevertheless useful to generate a deeper understanding of how capitalism has arrived at its current state. Neoliberalism is the dominant mode of contemporary political-economic systems, but it also provides a framework to critique contemporary capitalism and explore its downsides. There is clearly a central ideological component to neoliberalism, but as a social object 'actually existing,' neoliberalism also resides in the social structures and institutions that constitute the architecture of contemporary society. The central idea that underpins all neoliberal thought is the fundamental belief in the market both as the best way to organize society and as the best solution for society's ills (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). Liberalism as a political and economic philosophy dominated Western economies for two centuries (Wall, 2015), but neoliberalism believes in and envisages a much greater role for the market, leading to a full marketization of society.

For the neoliberal there are almost no areas of society that do not offer the opportunity for competition and wealth generation. The current state

of capitalism has not evolved naturally; it is the result of a deliberate project to bring about the neoliberalization of the economy, politics, and society. The ‘intellectual kernel’ (Davies & Gane, 2021, p. 4) of neoliberalism dates back to the 1920s, but it was inaugurated as a formal movement in 1947 with the founding of the Mont Pelerin Society (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015). As the ideological founders of the Society, Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek set out their vision of a free-market society in reaction to the dominance of Keynesian, government intervention in the first half of the twentieth century (Davies & Gane, 2021). The project also developed the measures by which this vision could be achieved, central to which was the policy of deregulation in order to provide greater freedom for business (Bittle, 2020). A greater role for the market meant a reduced role for government and a fundamental attack on the notion of society itself (Brown, 2019). In the early 1980s neoliberalism’s ideals were incorporated into government policy with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as its earliest proponents. Neoliberalism became the ‘governing rationality’ (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 254) leading to policies of privatization, deregulation, and anti-union laws. The nature of neoliberalism continues to change and evolve (Davies & Gane, 2021) and has become increasingly connected with powerful libertarian and conservative networks on the political right (Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016).

Neoliberalism has become the hypernormal in the same way that the state ideology provided a monosemic reality in the form of a totalized ideological space (Yurchak, 2006). For Peck and Theodore (2019, p. 254), neoliberalism is a ‘dominant and dominating hegemonic programme.’ The neoliberal norms, built around a free-market fundamentalism, have become institutionalized across the majority of contemporary economies. Language plays a key role in the institutionalization of neoliberal ideology, especially through the adoption of common forms of business and managerial language that are ‘context-independent’ and primarily serve to demonstrate legitimacy or ‘ideological literacy’ (Yurchak, 2006, p. 48). The authoritative nature of the neoliberal discourse is achieved through its embedment within major world institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank which operate entirely on neoliberal assumptions (Simons, 2012). Neoliberalism, as we will explore

in this chapter, is also hypernormalized through broader societal institutions such as the corporation, the law, and globalization. The purpose of hypernormalizing an ideology, as was the case in the late-era Soviet Union, is the exercise of power to control society in a way that serves special interest which in our case is the corporate elite (Rauxloh, 2007). The neoliberalization of society is an ongoing process and far from complete. This was demonstrated by the response to the 2008 Financial Crisis which was, according to Peck and Theodore (2019, p. 249), ‘far from a retreat of neoliberalism, more like an audacious doubling down.’ The dominant role that neoliberal ideas and practices play in contemporary economies leads to impunity because of the absence of a competing authoritative other. The imagination is dominated by a capitalist, neoliberal representation of the social structure even though it is recognized as either not working or dislocated from lived experience (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). The other purpose served by the hyper-reality of neoliberalism is that it appears fixed, unchangeable, and as if it can go on forever (Economist, 2018). In this way, the corporation and other aspects of the neoliberal hegemony take on an air of permanence, as if they were natural rather than human constructs (Peck & Theodore, 2019; Hébert et al., 2019). The paradox for those living within the current neoliberal capitalist era is that we can directly experience the catastrophic cost of the system, but the authoritative discourse is so powerful that we cannot imagine an alternative.

Discourse

A central feature of the neoliberal discourse is the idea, the belief, in the positive role of business and that business and business activity is inherently good. Business organizations are perceived of as being benevolent entities and where they do cause harm it is unintentional (Hébert et al., 2019). The neoliberal discourse goes further to promote the notion that business is not only an entirely good thing but that corporations have a ‘socially necessary and socially beneficial role’ (Tombs & Whyte, 2015, p. 2). This positivity obscures the central role of business, and particularly

business corporations, which is to generate wealth. It presents business as the solution to societies problems and crises, but ignores the great extent to which commercial and industrial activity has been the primary cause of the most serious problems that society is trying to address, for example, pollution, inequality, poverty, climate change, and so on. The neoliberal discourse is based on a fundamental belief in the market as the best way to order society. Mainstream writing, thinking, and speech about business is grounded upon this market ideology and the neoliberalized economic system is continually reproduced through the texts produced by a range of 'local practitioners' of the neoliberal ideology (Yurchak, 2003, p. 497).

Ideological discourse is powerful because it becomes internalized by societal actors. It becomes a part of their belief system and forms part of their identity. The romantic, mythological nature of the neoliberal discourse, including freedom, entrepreneurialism, individual wealth, and so on, all serve to reinforce the compelling and enduring nature of the neoliberal discourse (Cooper, 2021). Neoliberalism has endured, in part, because it deliberately and explicitly aligned itself with traditional conservative values, such as the family and Christianity (Davies & Gane, 2021). This is part of the hypernormalizing process, it becomes so compelling and attractive, it makes sense, that it becomes difficult to envisage an alternative—in this way neoliberalism has become the hyper-reality, the only reality. They are taken for granted as the way things are rather than a product of human culture and history—a deliberate project of social transformation. Neoliberal discourse has succeeded in legitimizing wealth production as a worthy goal in itself. This has gone further to normalize the right of business to make profits, and that corporate interests should be respected and protected (Ansari & Hernandez, 2020). There is an acceptance that corporations should be able to pursue their profit maximizing activity because they deliver 'economically and socially productive roles' (Bittle, 2020, p. 134). At the same time the lack of responsibility that business has for the harms it causes has been normalized and accepted as an unfortunate but inevitable fact.

We are currently living in a neoliberalized social system. Such political-economic systems evolve in a complex way, but for deliberate projects of social system transformation, as Yurchak described in the Soviet Union, this requires an ongoing production of the ideological discourse. This

project has grown in power and influence into a network of organizations, institutions, and individuals all working towards bringing about free-market policies, smaller government, a greater marketization of society, and the greater freedom to create and accumulate wealth (Brown, 2019; MacLean, 2017; Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). It is the critics of this movement that label it neoliberalism, rather than the actors within the movement, but nevertheless the central aims of bringing about market societies are widely shared and understood. Some of the wealthiest people in the world, such as the Koch family (\$100 billion according to Forbes rich list), are key players in growing a powerful political network that builds the power and influence of big business and the influence of neoliberal and conservative ideology. Several prominent institutions have also played a major role in building and sustaining the neoliberal project from the Chicago School of Economics (Friedman, 2020) as well as wealthy and powerful think tanks such as the Cato Institute. The project to realize neoliberalization is powerful, well-funded and successful in terms of achieving its ambitions. The actors within the network are the primary producers of the neoliberal discourse and have developed highly effective ways of communicating the message, for example, by embedding themselves within the establishment, universities, and the judiciary (Brown, 2015, MacLean, 2018).

The neoliberal project, from its earliest intellectual roots 100 years ago, has become institutionalized within contemporary political economies with highly powerful networks of think tanks, free-market institutions, and lobbying organizations—all engaged in active reproduction of the ideological discourse. Big businesses, especially the mega-corporations, are also instrumental in the production and reproduction of the neoliberal discourse. Corporate PR is powerful and well-funded and produces the ideological texts in its corporate literature. This corporate text resembles the block texts reproduced in the late Soviet era (Yurchak, 2003), a shared corporate language that offers a compelling picture of commitment to social goals and responsibility. This hyper-reality of corporate integrity portrayed and presented through the corporate PR is far removed from the actual existing lived experience of exploited workers and citizens. The CSR movement illustrates the effectiveness of the ideological discourse produced by corporate PR. This leads to the absurd situation

that the catastrophic consequences of climate change are already causing widespread harm and destruction, yet the corporate discourse portrays a picture of corporations behaving responsibly. For Scheper (2015, p. 738) CSR ‘marks another victory of a “public relations exercise” by multinational firms,’ and as Rauxloh (2007) identifies, CSR has now become reduced to a marketing strategy. The extent of the institutionalization of the neoliberal doctrine is that the reproduction of the ideological text is also carried out by universities, especially the business schools, and in the wider public sector in its policy documents, strategies, and guidance. The free-market ideology is also reproduced in popular culture, with increased marketization, smaller government, individualism, consumerism presented as the norm. Owners of media, particularly newspapers, are wealthy predominantly conservative, free-market adherents. Where alternative critical positions to neoliberalism are presented, they are still incorporated into the broader neoliberal paradigm and marginalized in a safe, non-threatening critical space.

Impunity has also been made possible because human and ecological suffering has become normalized. The IPPC reports regularly communicate the perilous position with climate change and the limited time available to take meaningful action, but these catastrophic projections register very low on the news agenda and make little difference to public opinion or concern (Swim et al., 2019). The produced neoliberal discourse actively seeks to obscure the social costs of corporate activity (Tombs & Whyte, 2015) and achieve the outcome of ‘concealing the manifest flaws in our economic system’ (Wright & Nyberg, 2015, p. 29). Ansari and Hernandez describe the hypernormal neoliberal regimes as deceptions that serve to ‘facilitate continued assaults upon workers’ rights and freedoms’ (2020, p. 2). For Wright and Nyberg (2015, p. 44), the neoliberal discourse, by incorporating critique, has ‘created a fantasy of sustainability’ that obscures the actually existing devastation and destruction big caused to the environment. The more subtle aspects of this normalization of suffering is through neoliberalism’s direct attack on the notion of the social. If the social does not exist, then the idea of underlying systemic inequalities and injustices can also be ignored and remain unaddressed, leaving the existing systems of power and privilege in place. The discourse shapes perceptions to the extent that harm and suffering are the unfortunate but

inevitable consequences of capitalism (Hébert et al., 2019; Brown, 2019) and are 'rooted in the biological nature of man' (Rothbard, 2000 [1974], p. 8). The downsides of capitalism become accepted as necessary if we are to sustain our current way of life and standard of living. This normalization of suffering has also been enabled by the financialization of everyday life which has occurred as a result of the neoliberalization process. During the COVID-19 pandemic the UK government emphasized the economic costs over the human costs as evidenced in its policies and decision-making in response. The neoliberal discourse has the effect of 'disarming public critique' (Scheper, 2015, p. 738) by framing the contemporary capitalist model as the only one available, thereby making moral judgment unnecessary because there is no alternative set of standards to critique it against (MacIntyre, 1999).

Once it has become hypernormalized, the neoliberal system was now widely perceived as the only possible version of reality, and this means that people do not have an external or alternative frame to critique it. This limits the extent to which people can exert moral agency and in this way neoliberalism represents a real threat to moral agency (Macintyre, 1999). The power of the neoliberal critique produced, reproduced, and reinforced over a period of at least 70 years means that the role of business becomes unquestioned and escapes meaningful and widespread critical examination. The neoliberal project has succeeded in shaping societal values and has successfully transformed societies' beliefs through the 'capitalist imaginary' that 'exacts a powerful grip on our thinking and actions' (Wright & Nyberg, 2015, p. 46). Our socialization within a dominant neoliberalized societal system shapes perceptions of governments, business and the wider public, to the extent that it achieves the 'shaping (and reshaping) of common sense' (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 255). In neoliberalist thinking the human world simply consists of individuals and markets, rather than any conception of society, thereby precluding any notion of social justice (Brown, 2019). Moral agency is impaired by corporations exerting their considerable power to 'transform societies beliefs in ways that serve powerful interests' (Bittle, 2020, p. 138). Individual managers might be committed to addressing social problems in their role as citizens (Wright & Nyberg, 2017), but once in the organizational setting, their 'habits of heart and mind' are strongly shaped by the

institutionalized neoliberal discourse (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 313). The logics of corporations and business have infiltrated the human psyche to create the absurd state of affairs that holding corporations to account is considered a threat to society (Hébert et al., 2019). The pervasive neoliberal discourse prevents the framing of social issues in terms of corporate harms and social or environmental injustice, so there is no reason or motivation to hold business corporations to account, in other words they can go on acting with impunity. The ideological nature of the neoliberal project constrains the moral agency necessary to hold them to account and prevent impunity. Our identities have become subsumed within the neoliberal system in a 'ubiquitous self-embedding or interweaving' (Yurchak, 2006, p. 7) which makes it difficult to achieve sufficient critical separation. This identification with businesses, corporations, and brands further serves to limit the extent that problems are attributed to business.

The Corporation

The corporation is the primary vehicle for driving the process of neoliberalization and therefore a key enabler of impunity. Multinational corporations play a dominant role in the contemporary political and economic system. The corporation is a legal entity that was established solely for the purpose of wealth production and the protection of the investors engaged in that wealth production (Elliot, 2021). The corporation is an 'ingenious legal device' (Barley, 2007, p. 202) for creating profit without responsibility. Maximizing profit is the single, driving purpose of corporations, and any social considerations are secondary, and viewed only through the lens of profitability (Bakan, 2015; Rauxloh, 2007; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). The corporation is legally constituted in a way that provides special privileges to its owners, directors and investors (Bittle, 2020). There are three aspects to these special privileges: corporate personhood, where the corporation has rights as if it were a person; limited liability that protects the corporation from the consequences of its activities; and the 'corporate veil' that means owners and directors can avoid being held liable for the 'sins of the company' (Hébert et al., 2019). The

legal design of corporations means that they 'are at best socially inefficient, and at worst systemically anti-social' (Tombs & Whyte, 2015, p. 21) and therefore particularly 'ill-suited' to address society's most pressing problems, such as climate change (Wright & Nyberg, 2017, 1635). In this way impunity is built into the fundamental nature of the corporation.

The corporation itself, although treated in law as a person, is in reality unable to exercise moral conscience because only actual embodied corporate actors can do this (Rauxloh, 2007). This means that the corporation as an entity, at least as currently constituted, can only ever be an 'amoral calculator' (Bittle, 2020, p. 137) that is legally required to maximize profit. The way business is legally constituted in our contemporary neo-liberal political-economic system creates a legal structure of impunity and irresponsibility (Bittle, 2020). This creates the absurd situation where it is legal to inflict this social and environmental damage harm on people and the environment in the pursuit of wealth accumulating activity. Society, through its legal systems, permits powerful economic entities to inflict social and environmental damage without being held to account (MacIntyre, 1999). The hypernormalization of our neoliberalized socio-economic system has occluded the true nature of business corporations. Rather than being seen as relatively recent human constructions, corporations are widely accepted as the natural state, inevitable and therefore without alternative.

The purpose of the neoliberal project was always about increasing the power of big business and its wealthy owners, so they could accumulate wealth without restriction. Therefore the corporation, as an entity specifically designed for wealth production, has been central to, and synonymous with, the process of neoliberalizing the political economy. Libertarian and free-market proponents present their project as a moral quest for greater freedom, especially from the state, but this is freedom in its narrowest sense, that is, freedom for a small set of wealthy business owners rather than for citizens and workers more widely. The ideology of free markets, entrepreneurialism, and individual success has become the hyper-reality—far removed from the actually existing harm and destruction being inflicted on people and the environment (Kardos et al., 2016). Deregulation has been a central part of the neoliberal strategy, and it has

been implemented with great success, achieving a reduction in the capacity (and willingness) of government and civil society to hold the big business corporations to account. Hypernormalization generates absurdity, as evidenced by the unquestioned rhetoric of ‘cutting red tape’ being widely accepted as positive and in the national interest, whereas in reality it will reduce protections and lead to inevitable harms to people, society, and the environment. The contemporary neoliberalized political-economic system serves to create and perpetuate a ‘climate of impunity’ (Rauxloh, 2007, p. 298). The shift in power that has occurred as our system has become increasingly neoliberalized has led to governments that act primarily as an enabler for unaccountable and unchecked corporate growth, where citizens are assigned the role of passive consumers.

Supporters of the neoliberal system have a strongly held belief in the positive role that the market plays, and should play, in society. There is an assumption that markets are not only the most efficient way to operate the economy, but they are also the best way to regulate behavior and prevent harm. The ‘free market,’ as conceived by the neoliberal protagonists, is an illusion, and it is disingenuous of those that present the market as an ‘invisible hand’ that exists independently of business and guides behavior. In reality a central aim of the neoliberal project has been to deliberately shape and control the market in order to serve the interest of powerful corporations. In the neoliberal era a major shift in power has occurred from governments to big business, providing even more scope for supposedly free markets to be shaped to serve corporate interests. The ability to shape markets has also reduced consumer power, for example, where the Big Tech companies have created effectively monopolies.

The dramatic increase in corporate power in the neoliberal era demonstrates the success of the neoliberal project. The power of government, civil society institutions, and workers has been significantly reduced. A clear example of this is with the world’s inability to deal with climate change. Despite the commitments made by governments to reducing CO₂ emissions, the reality is that fossil-fuel production and consumption continues to grow, and big corporations have been able to exert immense power to prevent changes in law and policy that would reduce or outlaw the use of fossil fuels. It is absurd that society has ceded power to

corporations, in the belief that wealth production benefits society, when it is patently self-destructive and already causing harm, destruction, and system breakdown.

Many of the changes in society, such as reductions in union membership and the reduction of union power and rights, are not a natural and inevitable evolution of society. There is a deliberate and ongoing project by big corporations to limit unionization of workers by demonizing the role of unions and promoting the paternalistic and positive role of corporations in looking after their workers' interests. This paternalism is insincere and cynical, given that US employers spend \$340 million per year in anti-union activity (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). The phenomenon of corporate exploitation has been present throughout the industrial era, but deregulation and increased corporate wealth and power has exacerbated the problem. Forty years of neoliberalizing policies has concentrated power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands (Piketty, 2014) further enabling and institutionalizing impunity (Barley, 2007). Ever increasing corporate power means there is a greater likelihood of harm being caused with impunity because, according to Kelly (2012, p. 341), 'the relative economic and political power of corporations expands.... while largely escaping responsibility.' Corporate power itself has become the hypernormal, as if it is the natural and only way to organize society. This is a dangerous situation because it limits the critique of corporations and their role, and also constrains the imagining of alternatives. The corporation is the pervasive social institution in the neoliberal era, resulting in a 'corporatization' of all modes of organizing not simply business but also across government, public sector, and civil society organizations.

The Law

Impunity is enabled by the law, which itself has been shaped by hypernormalized neoliberalism. The purpose of law, and the broader justice system, is to prevent impunity by holding people to account for their actions where they transgress the accepted norms and codes. Although some business organizations and individuals do get prosecuted, many of the laws are unenforceable and are simply ignored by large businesses

(Bohme, 2015). Hypernormalized neoliberalism has succeeded in shaping the norms and accepted moral codes upon which laws are built. However, it is the case that most of the societal and environmental harm inflicted by organizations occurs within the law. So rather than a 'governance gap' (Elliot, 2021, p. 197), it is more a case of legalized impunity or 'legal lawlessness' (Elkins, 2022). The law is a product of the prevailing or dominant social order, so it is inevitable that the law reflects the current neoliberal hegemony (Hébert et al., 2019). Even where laws do exist, and are enforceable, they can still, as a result of corporate influence, be unjust (Bakan, 2015). Impunity has therefore become embedded in the legal system through the process of societal neoliberalization (Elliot, 2021), and it is not just that the legal entity of the corporation that is designed to prioritize wealth production and accumulation but the whole legal system favors business over society. In practice, investor rights are afforded more protection, and given higher priority, than human rights or environmental protection. Barley (2007, 204) makes the case that legislation 'benefits corporate citizens at the expense of individual citizens,' this making the social subordinate to the interests of capital, in the eyes of the law (Hébert et al., 2019; Bohme, 2015). Business and commerce are dependent upon the law in order to function, but neoliberalism has also succeeded in using state power in the shaping of a system of laws that serves its interest very well (Elliot, 2021; Davies & Gane, 2021).

Friedman (1970) and the other proponents of free market are disingenuous, when they claim that the only social duty of corporations entails making a profit and keeping within the law. This is to perpetuate a fiction that the market and the state are entirely separate entities (Tombs & Whyte, 2015). In practice corporations and wealthy business interests actively and successfully shape the law so that it serves their interests. States and mainstream political parties have accepted and internalized the neoliberal norms, so it is inevitable that the laws they enact will be pro-market and pro-business (Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). Neoliberalism, in the hypernormalized version of reality it creates, becomes the 'lens that directs legal reasoning' (Bittle, 2020, p. 134). Governments rationalize this pro-business shift by arguing that it is in the national interest. Big business, especially the multinational corporations, use their power and wealth to successfully lobby and influence

governments, resulting in ‘a debilitating economization of the political’ (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 257). The extent to which political parties are funded by corporate interest enables influence to be bought, but at the same time it diminishes democratic accountability and in doing so increases the risk of corporate impunity. Individual politicians, as the lawmakers, also have close links to the think tanks and free-market lobbying organizations. Immense corporate influence has been achieved by embedding politicians within the neoliberal network (Bohme, 2015). However, this goes further than lobbying activities because often the business and corporate actors themselves are allowed to be directly involved in creating new legislation and regulation. For Barley this shows how ‘corporate actors can co-opt the regulatory agency’s agenda’ (2007, p. 210). All of these processes of political influence have achieved pro-market and pro-corporate governance and the enabling of impunity.

Deregulation has also contributed to this shift in the balance of power from governments to business, especially the large multinational corporations. This strategy to accumulate power also reveals the essentially anti-democratic nature of the neoliberal project (Davies & Gane, 2021). It has resulted in changing the nature and role of the nation state, rendering it less able, or willing, to hold powerful business entities to account (Bohme, 2015). There has also been a dismantling and disempowering of the civil society institutions that were designed to hold economic actors to account and prevent harm. Citizens have therefore become disempowered because of the submissiveness of governments to corporate interests to the extent that, as Wright and Nyberg (2015, p. 421) argue, ‘representative democracy has been replaced by a corporate society in which social and environmental relations are embedded within corporate capitalism.’ It is the largest corporations that shape the economic environment, but this enables the smaller business entities to also act with impunity within the deregulated environment that has been created in the neoliberal era.

In democratic societies civil society institutions play a vital role in holding powerful actors to account. However, during the neoliberal era, the relative power of civil society institutions, such as labor unions, has diminished as corporate power has significantly increased. Despite the absurd mantra that ‘our workers are our greatest asset,’ the reality is that there has been a significant shift in the balance of power from the

employee to the employer. This shift in power has enabled widespread worker exploitation and human rights abuses by corporations (Federman, 2021). The neoliberal project has therefore succeeded in its aim of ‘vanquishing society and the social’ (Brown, 2019, p. 53), and it will take a concerted counter-project to restore the balance in favor of society, citizens, and workers. When incidents of abuse of worker human rights are uncovered, corporations usually respond with an ideologically literate account that demonstrates the art of block writing (Yurchak, 2006). In 2022 when it was revealed that forced labor was being used in workers in the Dyson supply chain (Shah & Kaddourah, 2022), the response of the company is in the form of pre-fabricated blocks of obfuscating neoliberal discourse, such as ‘We are committed to the safety, health and wellbeing of people who work for us and with us; upholding a culture where people are valued and respected’ (Dyson Modern Slavery Statement, 2021).

Freedom is a core value at the heart of the neoliberal ideology, and the project has been highly successful in securing the freedom for corporations to act with impunity to serve their narrow self-interest of wealth production. This freedom to act without responsibility for the wider consequences comes, of course, at the expense of a universal conception of freedom that encompasses all parts of society. The ideology of freedom of the individual, including freedom of the corporate person, has led to increasing individualism under the neoliberalization of contemporary economies. This individualism also reduces the power of citizens and workers to act collectively, combining their individual power to challenge the overbearing power of corporations and big business (Economist, 2018). This freedom to act, along with the accumulation of wealth and power, has enabled big business to use the legal system to resist accountability through ‘raw expressions of corporate power’ (Bittle, 2020, p. 132). The liberation of capital (Peck & Theodore, 2019) means that these corporate entities are able to contest and overturn judgments made against them as well as being able to quash any moves that strengthen the law (Bohme, 2015). Corporate public relations (PR) plays a major role in shaping a discourse that limits the public’s ability to attribute responsibility to big business for the harms that they cause. Corporate law also provides corporations with the freedom to avoid legal accountability through mergers and acquisitions, ‘corporate actors may legitimately use a

subsidiary in order to shelter the parent company.... from activities that may attract legal liability' (Simons, 2012, p. 32). The 40-year process of widespread neoliberalization of economies has led to immense corporate power, and a small group of elite wealthy individuals have secured the freedom to effectively operate above the law and beyond 'all forms of state intervention and control' (Davies & Gane, 2021, p. 14).

The high degree of corporate unaccountability has been achieved by the neoliberal project's ability to influence the trend towards 'soft' law or voluntary regulation (Simons, 2012). The naive faith placed by governments and citizens in soft law, that is, the ability of big business to self-regulate, has been entirely misplaced and unfounded (Rauxloh, 2007). The neoliberal discourse, which constitutes the contemporary hyper-reality, has very effectively obscured the political dimension of economic activity and led to an acceptance that rational, technocratic management is the way to address societal problems. The powerful and ongoing discourse that positions business as a positive force has led to the widespread belief that 'the corporation is an inherently good and, but for the rare occasion, law-abiding entity' (Hébert et al., 2019, p. 569). This generally positive conception of big business has led to unfounded expectations that big business is genuinely committed to acting with responsibility. The reality, obscured beneath the ubiquitous and well-communicated message of corporate responsibility, is that wealth accumulation, profitability and growth remain the single overriding purpose of business organizations. Businesses engage in CSR activity for self-interested reasons and only 'to the extent to which it is profitable for the corporations to do so' (Rauxloh, 2007, p. 208). Soft law and self-regulation has patently failed, as evidenced by ongoing harm and destruction at a human, social, and environmental level. Nevertheless, big business has been very successful in incorporating the demand for greater responsibility, leading to the emergence of an absurd form of 'corporate environmentalism' that is cynically designed to protect business rather than the environment (Wright & Nyberg, 2017, p. 1634). Even one of the prime movers of the CSR movement, John Elkington, has acknowledged that the movement has failed and requires a rethink, to the extent that he suggested his seminal publication about the 3 Ps (People, Planet, Profit) should be 'recalled' (Elkington, 2018). Scheper (2015, p. 745) argues that we should

‘understand corporate responsibility as a semantic compromise’ that is in effect a license to operate a managerial form of social responsibility that serves its own interests first. For Rauxloh (2007) the unenforceability of soft law and voluntary codes are used by big business as a means to avoid accountability for the negative social and environmental impacts of their wealth creating activity. Despite the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility, and the well-publicized policies and initiatives, the reality of continued harm and destruction suggests that these professions of commitment are hollow and progress is an illusion (Scheper, 2015).

Globalization

The hypernormalized neoliberal discourse presents an entirely positive view of global free trade without acknowledging the downsides of actual existing globalization (Scheper, 2015). A more critical perspective, from outside the dominant neoliberal paradigm, is that globalization is better understood as a deliberate strategy adopted by transnational businesses in order to avoid the greater levels of regulation and accountability that their operations are subject to in their home jurisdiction (Baxi, 2010; Rauxloh, 2007). The lack of prosecutions of multinational corporations is evidence of the impunity they can achieve through a globalized strategy (Kelly, 2012). Big business is able to violate human rights with impunity because corporations can operate so effectively and profitably outside their national jurisdiction (Elliot, 2021). The decisions by the owners, managers, and shareholders to exploit the lower standards of accountability in other countries reflects a moral judgment or set of values that places more importance on wealth creation and accumulation than it does on human and environmental rights. This absence of lack of genuine ethical decision-making is demonstrated in the complicity of corporations in acts of genocide. Although they do not directly commit, corporations are often supplying the perpetrators, for example, machetes used to kill Tutsis and mustard gas components used by Saddam Hussain against the Kurds (Kelly, 2012).

International law is inadequate for holding multinational corporations to account. The lack of meaningful sanctions (Rauxloh, 2007) provides

these big businesses with the freedom to operate without responsibility. Impunity, and its harmful and destructive consequences, is therefore deeply embedded within the international legal system. Corporations have the freedom to operate because the international law protects non-state actors, such as corporations, so they cannot be held criminally liable for violations of human or environmental rights (Baxi 2010; da Costa, 2017). As we saw earlier with domestic laws, it is also the case that international laws and treaties are shaped to serve corporate interests and 'extend TNC [Transnational Corporations] freedom to operate with fewer impediments globally' (Simons, 2012, p. 26). Corporations have been able to achieve a dominance over the international system as evidenced at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference in 2021 when delegates from fossil-fuel corporations outnumbered the delegates from the low-income countries most affected by climate change (Jacobs, 2022). This demonstrates that corporations are 'privileged insiders' (Simons, 2012, p. 33) and able to exert a powerful influence over lawmakers, for example, in promoting the development of soft law and self-regulation (Scheper, 2015). There are a small number of elite super corporations that are able to exert formidable pressure on national governments to ensure international agreements and treaties continue to serve the best interest of big business. According to the Global Policy Forum (2022) 'of the 100 largest economies in the world, 51 are now global corporations; only 49 are countries,' thus demonstrating the power shift achieved over four decades of neoliberalizing policies and how this has 'significantly diminished the authority of states' (Bakan, 2015, p. 232). Multinational corporations also have the wealth, power, and expertise necessary to exploit international law in a way that aligns with their interests (Bohme, 2015). The corporatization of regulatory regimes means that an illusion of progress can be sustained (Scheper, 2015) despite the actually existing harms being perpetrated by the corporation. This situation is absurd, in that corporations are able to demonstrate compliance, despite causing harm! International law and trade agreements have also been shaped by high-income countries to serve their interests to the detriment of lower- and middle-income countries (Bohme, 2015). In this way international law serves to perpetrate inequality and injustice.

International law has been used to facilitate the exploitation and dominance of other nations by powerful countries in the Global North (Simons, 2012). Corporations have been able to generate immense wealth by exploiting the structural inequalities that are sustained by the international legal system. The power imbalances between MNCs and the low-income countries where they carry out their activities is much more pronounced than it is in their home country. The dominance of MNCs across the world's economy has been characterized as a contemporary form of colonialism (Baxi, 2010). Corporate friendly, neoliberal international law underpins this neocolonialism, and Alvarez (2008) suggests that globalization itself is made possible by an 'empire of law.' The legacy of the colonial structures still ensures that extreme inequality exists between the high-income 'developed world' and the low-income, developing countries. Bohme (2015, p. 7) describes the relationship between the USA and Central America as a form of 'informal imperialism.' These power imbalances, sustained by international law and international institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, reduce the autonomy of lower-income, developing countries to govern MNCs. Powerful countries and corporations sustain an international legal system that deliberately 'restricts the freedom of sovereign states to regulate economic activity' (Simons, 2012, p. 26). Powerful transnational corporations are able to act with impunity by exploiting the less powerful judicial system in which they operate globally (Elliot, 2004). Nation states will also resist constraints on corporate activity so that it does not prevent inward investment by the multinational corporations (Elliot, 2004). In doing these corporations are exploiting the economic powerlessness of low-income countries (Bohme, 2015) because it 'does not lie in the state's best interest to act against multinational corporations who offer employment, revenue, and prestige to the national government' (Rauxloh, 2007, p. 305).

The state of impunity afforded to big multinational corporations by the system of international law leads to ongoing abuse of human rights and degradation of the environment (Davies & Gane, 2021; Scheper, 2015). It is absurd that impersonal corporate entities have more rights and protection under neoliberal rules of free trade than the actually existing human beings impacted by the actions of the corporations. The actions of global corporations, especially their role in human and

ecological disasters, clearly demonstrate that investor rights are given priority over human rights (Simons, 2012). These imbalances are unsustainable and unethical, given that the impoverished populations everywhere bear a 'disproportionate burden of human harm and hurt' (Baxi, 2010, p. 26).

Conclusion

The overall argument presented in this chapter is that the impunity of business organizations is sustained and enabled by the nature of the contemporary political and economic system. We have conceptualized the current system as neoliberal capitalism, and this has developed and become further entrenched by neoliberal governments over the past 40 years. In other words, the social and environmental harm that results from impunity is a systemic problem rather than the actions and malfeasance of a few 'bad apples.' It is the nature of free markets and ineffective regulation that have inevitably led to a prioritization of profit and wealth creation over social and environmental well-being. In the chapter we have sought to theorize the process by which neoliberalism has become so deeply embedded and hypernormalized. One of the mechanisms for this has been through primary social institutions such as the law. The current position is absurd, with business organizations and especially multinational corporations being able to accumulate profits and wealth with impunity, that is, without accountability for the costs incurred by society and the environment. Government and civil society allow this legalized destruction to continue, and it has transferred so much power to big business that non-business actors have become seemingly powerless to address the problem.

The current era of neoliberalism, and its enabling of business impunity, is unsustainable for the future well-being of people and the environment. Impunity is morally unsustainable in terms of it being unjust, but it also leads to widespread harm and destruction. The hypernormalization of neoliberalism is one of the reasons why civil society is currently unable to address because the hyper-real constrains our ability to conceive of alternatives. Hypernormalization prevents us from 'seeing' the

true nature of the current economic system, because neoliberalism is the dominant paradigm through which current practice is interpreted. More problematically it leads to misdiagnosis of social problems and the pursuit of technical-managerial rather than systemic solutions, as seen in initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In this chapter we theorized the process by which we arrived at the current state in the era of neoliberal capitalism. This process has been the culmination of a deliberate and well-organized project to increase the power and freedom to generate and accumulate wealth. This process has taken a long time to realize and has involved the neoliberalization of key institutions. Neoliberalization therefore is more than an abstract ideology, with 'actually existing' neoliberalism taking many forms in how it embedded itself across society in both institutions and mindsets.

If impunity and our current system are unsustainable, what actions can be taken to address our contemporary societal problems? If there is to be a 'counter-project' or movement that will bring about a post-neoliberal or sustainable political and economic era, then perhaps lessons have to be learned from the success of the neoliberal project itself. The process of neoliberalization was achieved through a highly political, well-organized, and well-funded project. So any movement to bring about a new sustainable political-economic era must adopt equally political and well-organized approach. The neoliberal project has succeeded in bringing about wide-scale systemic change, so in the same way the counter-project must also have such an ambitious transformational goal. This highly political process will inevitably involve resistance and struggle. Immense corporate power has been achieved and this will be not relinquished easily. There is no incentive for the large corporations and their wealthy owners to change the destructive absurdity of the current neoliberal system, because it is not absurd to them as beneficiaries of it. Therefore, the process to reshape the political economy to a post-neoliberal, sustainable era could entail an equally long-term project lasting 30 years or more.

Hypernormalization creates the illusion of permanence, but the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that economic and political systems can be changed, and ultimately governments can act to control the actions of big business. If this can be achieved in an emergency situation,

then such transformational change can also be achieved to address the long-term crises and emergencies that the world currently faces. The current neoliberal era is not a permanent state, it can be reformed and recreated into something more sustainable. The power shift from business to government necessary for addressing destructive impunity is demonstrably achievable as shown by the power that individual states were able to wield during the pandemic.

The transformation to a new era will require establishing new institutions, new norms, and practices. It will require alternative forms of business enterprises that are by nature sustainable. It will require a social movement or social transformation that is equally successful as that which was able to realize the transformation to neoliberalism. The irony is that neoliberalism was a project of social change and transformation, while at the same time its espoused ideology was grounded upon the notion that there is 'no such thing as society.'

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8

Absurdity of the Climate Transition That Never Happened

In March 1972, the Club of Rome released the now world famous report ‘The Limits to Growth.’ In the very opening of the report, the authors write (Meadows et al., 1972, p. 17):

Many people believe that the future course of human society, perhaps even the survival of human society, depends on the speed and effectiveness with which the world responds to these issues. And yet only a small fraction of the world’s population is actively concerned with understanding these problems or seeking their solutions.

These *issues* referred to the ‘arms race, environmental deterioration, population explosion, and economic stagnation.’ Later on in the report, it is expected that somewhere over the next hundred years, the limits to growth on this planet will have been reached. At the time of writing, it is 2022, precisely 50 years after the publication of the report, and, as stated by the report, we are halfway the hundred years left to remedy these ‘issues.’ It is notable how population explosion was included to be one of the primary issues that the report addressed (being the topic of the first chapter in the report as well, which was on exponential growth—including growth of populations across the world). Fifty years later, the ‘arms

race' may not be that pronounced as during the Cold War, but nonetheless remains a global challenge (especially in the context of the integration of the global weapon industry within neoliberal capitalism whereby it constitutes one of the most profitable industries to invest in). It is also interesting to observe how economic stagnation was perceived as a major problem in the late 1960s and early 1970s, while today economic growth is also perceived as the cause of many societal problems, rather than something that should be 'fixed.' Moreover, population explosion remains within the sphere of taboo today—even though the Club of Rome report quoted *The Great Gatsby* in mentioning that 'the rich get richer, the poor get children' (p. 42). Finally, and the primary objective of the current chapter, the report mentions environmental deterioration as a source of major concern. While on the one hand, the report points to the rise in carbon emissions, on the other hand, the report refers to global warming as causing 'serious climatic effects' (p. 73). Furthermore, it is interesting to read how nuclear power (despite production of nuclear waste) was discussed as a potential alternative to fossil fuels, a discussion that continues to this day (e.g., Helm, 2012). It is striking how the 'mythical' notion of nuclear power has such long tradition, presenting a fantasy of hypernormalization without any real cost. Yet, before getting into the absurdities and hypernormalization around climate change, it is important to postulate the main question that will be dealt with in this chapter: why, if already the Club of Rome report raises these issues 50 years ago, is it that nothing has been done over the last 50 years to *truly* deal with the destructive effects of the economic growth imperative for our existence on this planet? Why did the climate transition never actually happen?

While there are many responses that can be provided to these questions, climate inertia or climate greenwashing can be theorized within the framework of absurdity and hypernormalization. In so doing, I hope to provide new insights into the question of why the climate transition did and does not happen. In fact, since the publication of the Club of Rome report, global emissions have (at least) doubled (EPA, 2022). There is little indication that carbon emissions, which is one of the most important indicators of pollution, climate change, and global warming, are substantially reduced (globally). Hence, it is not just a matter of the global inability to address climate change, but in contrast, it is the case

that the planet is on course to self-destruction through an almost irreversible path of carbon emission growth that is currently making life on the planet increasingly unsustainable, with extreme weather conditions becoming a norm throughout the world—from extreme droughts and wildfires to storms, extreme rainfall, and erosion of the planet. In the face of the complexity of our predicament, there are a variety of explanations including the sheer grand scale of the issue: while a form of universal government is needed to address this global issue, there is decreasing hope of the possibility of such effective global response (e.g., through the United Nations). In other words, while there is rising awareness of the need to ‘tackle’ climate change at a global scale, at the same time, inertia dictates global responses, and with the rise of (temporary) authoritarian regimes across the globe, radical climate action seems further away than ever. It is not difficult to postulate the absurdity of this situation—as described in the first chapter, the ultimate impossible paradox of the destruction of the planet for economic profit and survival constitutes the very basis for the understanding of the current chapter. After all, the absurdity of climate inertia is readily discernable: the world’s inertia vis-à-vis its self-constructed destruction of the planet is not just illogical, inappropriate, and out-of-tune, but also indicated through an active denial of the seriousness of it all (even when governmental and business leaders raise the issue of global warming). In this sense, climate change is being hypernormalized as something that is taken for granted, part of contemporary reality, and outside the cause-effect relationship of carbon emission-global warming. Underpinning this hypernormalization is perhaps an existential anxiety, one of a complete breakdown of ontological security, and a disintegration of the self in the face of changes that are no longer under control of and beyond the reach of humanity. However, this absurdity does not only concern the individual, as it also contains the tragic and dangerous nature inherent to absurd social practice in our contemporary world: climate change does already affect people’s lives profoundly, and through hypernormalizing the absurdity of climate inertia, the tragic nature becomes amplified into something beyond, that what is referred to as evil (Boym, 2008). When its tragic nature is fully revealed, it is difficult to speak of mere absurdity, and it is more appropriate to refer to climate inertia as an act of evil practice—the active denial and

unwillingness to radically alter the ways of living and organizing global society. However, before such conclusions can be drawn, it is relevant to ascertain how climate action and/or inertia unfold at the individual level. Any social practice is internalized at the individual level, and while absurdity manifests through the interaction between a human being and one's environment, this chapter adds understanding through the analysis of the fantasmatic involvement into climate inertia.

Ultimately the question is about why humanity seems to be unable to deal with the consequences of its own destructive behavior, and find ways to constructively shape effective responses to mitigate against these consequences. On the one hand, we are faced with the absurdity of climate inertia or climate *in*action (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019; Munck af Rosenschöld et al., 2014). While the destruction of our planet for the artificial gains of economic profit could be portrayed as an inherent absurdity, whereby short-term gains (for a privileged few) are prioritized at the expense of long-term planetary survival, it is striking that the responses to such tainted past and present are inherently absurd as well. The absurdity of the unwillingness of political leaders to engage in radical action to 'save our planet' has been now more widely acknowledged. Hence, it seems we are confronted with a doubling-up of absurdity, a process that seems unstoppable, such as indicated by the continued growth of carbon emissions globally over the last 50 years. In sum, the much needed climate transition from a fossil-fuel economy and society towards a sustainable 'green' economy and society constitutes an absurdity: inertia dictates current political, economic, and societal responses to this proclaimed need for the climate transition.

However, at the same time, a counter-argument holds that there is a lot of climate action taking place across various levels: the United Nations has organized its 26th Climate Conference in 2021 in Glasgow, Scotland (COP26), it has developed the Sustainable Development Goals to articulate the necessary changes that need to take place in various areas of society to make the climate transition happen, and the IPCC has conducted and summarized the latest scientific knowledge about the necessary steps to 'manage' global warming and how to do so (IPCC, 2022). Moreover, similar pro-climate attitudes can be ascertained throughout global society and even among business leaders. Hence, in theoretical terms, we are

witnessing a more nuanced form of hypernormalization of climate inertia, which is in need of greater understanding. In other words, the acknowledgment of climate change profoundly impacting our planet and life on our planet is now shared more widely across society, and has also been confirmed by the more conservative, mainstream groups in society. Doing nothing is no longer an option, and therefore, it can be observed how new forms of hypernormalization unfold.

This more complex situation that we have entered could be explained well on the basis of the famous dictum from Tomasi Di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*: 'Everything must change for everything to remain the same.' Hence, on the one hand, society, governments, organizations and individuals are all aware of the need to engage in climate action, and to take necessary steps to reduce carbon emissions and lead and participate in the transition towards a green society. The notion of the necessity of the climate transition has now been normalized across many countries globally. It has also been through advertising that large organizations, including fossil-fuel companies, have actively contributed to this normalization of climate action. For instance, it is no longer surprising to see large fossil-fuel companies, which have profited tremendously from selling oil for decades, proclaiming a 'genuine' commitment to combatting climate change and contribute to the transition to a sustainable economy. Moreover, individuals are being called upon to play their part by, for instance, insulating their houses, recycling their waste, and reducing their own carbon footprint. Too often, such discourse is strengthened through government campaigns, advertising, and scientific evidence that points to the role of individual behavior in the climate transition. In sum, this all belongs to Lampedusa's first part: we are now all aware of the need for 'everything to change.' On the other hand, however, the second part should not be forgotten and underestimated. This points to the necessary question of whether everything that has been done so far has had any substantial effect on the climate transition. On the larger and global scale, it could be assessed that there is a positive correlation between UN-organized COP meetings (i.e., global climate conferences to discuss the necessary steps towards the climate transition) and global carbon emissions. In other words, since the Club of Rome report, we have witnessed a number of global initiatives to discuss the necessary steps towards

the climate transition, but without any substantial effect: in fact, global emissions have only increased over the last 50 years (EPA, 2022). In this sense, the imperative of economic growth and profit have prevailed, and continue to do so. Lampedusa's dictum proves (again) to describe the process of absurdity and hypernormalization accurately: while governments and organizations call for the need of everything to change towards a sustainable society and economy, everything also ought to remain the same. As articulated across various chapters in this book, it is the dominant neoliberal capitalist hypernormal that also explains climate inertia.

Hegemonic actors in society understood too well the core functioning of this process: while attention can be drawn to the need to transform society towards a sustainable one, all the necessary action and steps should remain within the sphere of neoliberal capitalism (Brown, 2016). Hence, everything had/has to change, but all will remain the same. It is here that we are confronted with the functioning of hypernormalization of climate inertia: a perception or feeling has to be transmitted that society as such, and actors within society, are genuinely engaged in meaningful activity towards combatting climate change. This points to the very meaning of actions such as recycling one's waste, and the introduction of sustainable or green labels to consumption goods. Such action has direct meaning in the context of greening society, but is not nearly radical enough (Žižek, 2018), as it does not question in any way the underlying socio-political economic structures that have contributed greatly to the destruction of the planet (i.e., the notion of economic utility trumping everything else). Engaging in such mundane action dissociates from the need of questioning such structures, through which all can remain the same. It is here that hypernormalization is effective. We are not merely speaking about the normalization of climate action, but the hypernormalization of climate inertia, which is disavowed psychologically through pseudo-action—the feeling one is contributing to a better environment, even though at a larger scale individual efforts pale in contrast to the continued rise of global pollution.

This shows how hypernormalization is hybrid to social circumstances: even when a particular societal fact does not seem deniable anymore (such as climate change, and thus the need for climate action), and as such cannot be 'hypernormalized' away from societal debate and public

discourse, it can still be dissociated from its necessary implications (i.e., the need for radical societal change towards a sustainable society). Hence, we are still witnessing a gap between authoritative discourse (i.e., governmental and organizational ‘commitment’ to climate action) and really existing practices (i.e., continued investment in exploitative neoliberal capitalism and ever-rising global carbon emissions). This very gap is continuously being hypernormalized and denied to exist as such. Powerful actors in society, therefore, continue to portray genuine commitment to climate action, in order to maintain the status quo. Thus, when Shell proclaims its commitment to renewable energy (Shell, 2022), it is not merely incompatible with its continued investment in destructive fossil fuels, but it also functions to legitimize the status quo. While the discussion whether fossil-fuel companies have a role to play in a sustainable economy is not being held, these very companies go to extreme lengths to protect their interests. Again, we are confronted with the absurdity of the climate transition that is being hijacked by the very actors in society that caused and contributed greatly to climate change itself.

The notion that those who have caused the problems cannot be the ones who also profit from ‘solving’ these problems remains a rather ignored societal debate. Instead, these powerful actors in society are the ones who currently benefit from the incorporation of the climate transition into the hegemonic neoliberal capitalist system. That is, the transformation towards a sustainable society, including the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, can be neatly integrated into the capitalist framework: renewable energy becomes just another profitable industry. Meanwhile, the old fossil-fuel companies are given all the possibilities to exploit the trade in fossil fuels for decades to come (without any proper restriction or regulation from government), and are given priority access to the transition to a green economy: these companies which have profited tremendously from the destruction of the planet are given decades to transition to companies that build their profit basis on other forms of energy, such as renewable energy (e.g., solar, wind, nuclear). Too often, such transition process also comes with the benefits of government subsidizing, lobbied for by these companies themselves, and thus paid for by the citizens through their taxes. The status quo remains perpetuated and hypernormalized, and meanwhile the failings of global government in

the neoliberal era are fully exposed: in a free-market society, governments seem more and more unable to control the companies that run their business on the basis of ever-growing carbon emissions. Furthermore, these companies have a global reach and act across borders, making them almost invulnerable to national regulation, as their reach stretches globally, enabling them to escape national regulation. Interestingly, the ways through which such organizational behavior is hypernormalized require a profound engagement with the hypernormalization of this absurdity itself: the mind of the individual has to be ‘colonized’ in order to close the gap between that what can be now readily discernable as the absurdity of the contemporary economic structuring that prioritizes economic profit over the exploitation and destruction of the planet and the continued ‘trust’ of the individual in the institutions of power in contemporary society. It is here that we observe a deliberate, ongoing, and indoctrinating process of hypernormalization, of capturing the mind of the individual through repeated exposure to greenwashing which has a numbing effect on the mind. While a skeptical reader or observer of authoritative discourse may dismiss its message and point to the absurdist nature of its very meaning, at the same time, it may hypernormalize the status quo in its very process of repeated exposure, which makes critical reflection not just a taxing exercise, but an increasingly impossible endeavor in the face of the continuous propaganda in which governmental communication becomes strikingly similar to that of corporate greenwashing. In the Netherlands, the following two campaigns show such similarity, that of the integration of governmental and corporate hypernormalization of incremental climate inertia.

Governmental Hypernormalization of Climate Inertia

In 2019, the Dutch government started the campaign ‘Everyone does *something*’ [Iedereen doet *wat*] (Rijksoverheid, 2019). The campaign aimed to show individual citizens a variety of ways through which they can contribute themselves to a more sustainable society, and offers ‘practical tips,’ such as about insulating one’s house and using the bicycle more

frequently instead of a car. On the official website the *wat* [something] is italicized and underlined, which has a double meaning in Dutch. On the one hand, and most likely intended by the governmental PR machine, it refers to the notion that everyone can make a contribution to the sustainable transformation and that this transformation can be aided by individual behavior. In this sense, it points to the idea that everyone would be able to contribute their (little) part to the sustainable transformation. However, on the other hand, a darker perspective emerges in another meaning of the campaign slogan. In this meaning, everyone does something refers to the rather incremental nature of *wat* [i.e., something], underpinning the rather marginal meaning of these behaviors in the context of the necessary climate transition, which can only be approached as a transformative, radical project of large, substantial societal change. With the campaign, it is implicitly acknowledged that such large-scale change is not aimed for by the government, rather staying with the incrementality of individual action. So, instead of the need to change *everything*, the government aims to do *something*. Finally, this notion is amplified through the messages on the website's homepage: for instance, insulating one's house is postulated to be financially beneficial as insulation saves money through lower energy bills. Such instrumentalization of climate action towards financial benefit for the individual exemplifies the core notion: that any type of climate action needs to be integrated into the dominant neoliberal ideology. Climate action is something that needs to have appeal to the individual because of its instrumental outcomes, where a moral appeal to engage in climate action lacks in conviction. In other words, the governmental campaign itself is based on the impotence of the ethical argument for climate action: citizens have to be seduced to contribute to climate action.

At the same time, it is noticeable that there is no counterpoint to such campaign: the 'everyone' refers not only to individuals but also to 'benevolent' corporations and other powerful actors in society. Meanwhile, implicitly the campaign (and government) assume these actors to be equally influential and capable to reduce their fair share of carbon emissions, while the role of corporations in the destruction of the planet is entirely ignored. In contrast, climate action is communicated to citizens (see Fig. 8.1) as an individual responsibility that may also come with



Fig. 8.1 'Everyone Does Something' Campaign Dutch Government. (From <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/09/09/klimaatcampagne-iedereen-doet-wat-van-start>)

financial benefit. In this way, government shapes authoritative discourse, and disavows the crucial role of business and corporations in the destruction of the planet and their continued attempts to deny their true responsibility, while greenwashing their reputation and hypernormalizing the status quo.

Corporate Hypernormalization of Climate Inertia

However, it is not only government that engages in such incremental, hypernormalizing approach to climate action. Corporations are the driving force behind such incrementalization of climate action (see, e.g., Klein's, 2014, analysis of how big business campaigned against climate action). A clothing brand in the Netherlands has one of their locations in the shopping mall near the central train station in Utrecht in the center of the country. Conveniently located next to the train station, the redecorated shopping mall (which was originally built in the 1960s

concrete-heavy style) has been redesigned in a way that resembles the American shopping mall, with bright lights, high ceilings and solely inhabited by chain stores. Entering the shopping mall gives an alienating experience, where one is immediately disorientated through the lack of windows or authentic street signs. Jointly, entry to the shopping mall presents an experience of entering a cathedral of consumerism, and it is here where one is confronted with the corporate side to climate inertia. Figure 8.2 shows the greenwashing of the clothing store, whose latest slogan has become #wear the change, using a green background. In the middle, one can observe a woman with a child (supposedly a mother with her child), added with the statement 'met liefde gemaakt' [made with love]. While this picture represents a mere example of greenwashing by companies (in this case greenwashing by the clothing industry), it also represents the hypernormalization within consumer society: the absurdity of the clothing industry (with cheap and fast fashion, making use of



Fig. 8.2 Wear the change campaign. (Picture taken by author)

globally polluting production processes and supply chains, and the exploitation of workers throughout the globe) is denied in the hypernormalization of cheap clothing. The greenwashing campaign by this clothing store ignores its role in perpetuating exploitation and destruction of the planet for the production of cheap fashion. For instance, the clothing brand was one the many clothing brands that had their clothing being produced in Rana Plaza (of which the 2013 disaster remains a fresh memory), but even though carrying responsibility for this actively lobbies against stricter safety regulation in the clothing factories (De Wereld Morgen, 2021). Meanwhile, the very message of the new slogan intends to convey to consumers that the company is genuinely committed to a wide range of corporate responsible behavior, including climate action and protection of workers' rights. And this greenwashing proves to be effective: these slogans allow individuals to continuing to consume, and while doing so, avoiding possible feelings of guilt by buying in into the greenwashing of an empty statement such as 'wear the change.' Akin to the previous example, citizens can therefore disavow their responsibility to engage in radical action towards a sustainable society, and meanwhile continue their lifestyles, as dictated through neoliberal ideology (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Yngfalk, 2016). In this way, corporations have at least a double offering to the consumer: it provides the materialist desire for consumption (and was the meaning of the COVID-19 pandemic to be found not primarily within the disruption of consumerism, both as a way out of neoliberal consumerism and as an anxiety of consumption-free loneliness?), and it provides a soothing mechanism in consumption itself, a mechanism that in the secular state was no longer provided by the church. Figure 8.2 points to this very semi-religious meaning in the addition of 'made with love'—this is not merely an 'empty statement' with no real meaning, but it constitutes the cynical disavowal par excellence. While at first glance it offers an inconsistency between the text and the picture, between how the clothing is made (with 'love') and for whom it is intended (i.e., the clothing should be worn by mothers and children), the combination of both reveals the intended message. The clothing store reconciles here the inconsistency between production and consumption, and unifies the love of the mother for her child with the love that the clothing is apparently made with. Love is therefore within the product

itself, and through buying the product, love is bought in equal measure. The catch, however, is within the cynical element of the (minimal) narrative: the love of a mother for her child is not merely a White European middle-class phenomenon, as pictured in Fig. 8.2, but extends in equal measure to the women working in the clothing factories producing these clothes ‘with love.’ However, love here is not mysteriously added within the product, but subtracted from the workers, in the raw exploitation taking place in these peripheral sites of production—as the destruction of lives in the Rana Plaza disaster showed, but also the environmental destruction caused in the production process (Sakamoto et al., 2019). Hence, the slogan ‘made with love’ should be read in a precise way: it is not meant in an additive but in a subtractive way, whereby the factory workers earn their salary while paying for the clothing with their love. The neo-colonial implications are present yet obfuscated in the absurdity of the greenwashing attempt, and thus hypernormalized. In sum, the analysis of one particular example within the clothing industry shows how corporations engage in hypernormalization of climate inertia: there is never merely an explicit denial of the seriousness of climate change, but authoritative discourse is shaped in a refined way. This means that corporations do not just greenwash their products (i.e., pretending that their products are made sustainably, without causing environmental or human harm), but there is always another layer, such as the ‘made with love’ statement in the picture. Such additional layer speaks to the internalization of ideology through fantasmatic involvement, and therefore always refers to the fantasy underpinning commodity fetishism: the product is never merely a product for consumption, but something special, something made with ‘love.’

A Psychology of Climate Inertia

While climate inaction can be attributed to the hypernormalization of the status quo by governments and corporations as explained above, this represents only part of the story. While there is tendency, especially among the political left, to attribute blame of societal malfunctioning and evil on the elite, the powerful actors in society, such process can only

unfold through the internalization of ideology into the core beliefs of people about the functioning of society and the economy. Akin the naked emperor, it is only because the emperor is regarded as such by the people that the emperor is able to hold on to one's position. Hence, there is a mutual interaction between hegemonic actors in society and 'the people.' Climate inertia is maintained not only through the authoritative discourse shaped by governments and business elites but also through the internalization in people's minds. Hence, in addition to the discussion above about the societal hypernormalization of climate inaction, we are also in need of an understanding of the psychology of climate inertia.

At the individual level, we can observe a tendency to rely on and place one's trust in these very existing institutions that have contributed to the problems themselves. While there is a growing sense of awareness of the need to drastically alter our ways of living in order to survive the devastating effects of climate change (even be it at the level of climate adaptation), a process of hypernormalization is also present, as described above. This plays out not just at the collective level, but through the internalization of a fantasy of normality. In this fantasy, the individual is able to psychologically manage the destructive effects of climate change through a range of coping mechanisms. First, there is the fantasy that the climate has always been changing and, for instance, that the extinction of the dinosaurs was the very effect of the climate changing (due to a 'natural' change of the climate, or an external intruder, such as a comet). Accordingly, the fantasy holds that the current changing climate is also due to 'natural' causes and that the impact of human behavior (and human's produced carbon emissions) on climate change is rather negligible. In this fantasy, the reality of climate change is not necessarily denied, but the role of humanity in it disavowed, which results in a rather fatalistic attitude about the possible role humanity can play in mitigating the impact of climate change. Instrumental in this process is the role of authoritative discourse, which continues to convey the 'genuine' commitment of governments and business towards climate action, through which the individual is able to strengthen the fantasy of normality. In other words, one is able to incorporate incremental, status quo driven, climate action by governments and business into a belief that necessary action is taken to address climate change, while, at the same time, the necessity of radical, structural change

is denied. In this way, authoritative discourse, notwithstanding the absurdity of its impotence to describe ‘really existing practices,’ is believed by individuals, and thus uncritically accepted into a perspective of reality. At the same time, authoritative discourse ‘colonizes the mind,’ numbing people through repeated exposure, decreasing possibilities for critical reflection to a point of quiet acquiescence. As described in Chap. 3, the absurdity of climate inertia is internalized as a fantasy of normality, in which the absurdity is outright denied to sustain a perception of effective action against climate change, or in other words a fantasy of the sustainable transition which initiation has been put in place by government. However, this individual-level hypernormalization process does not unfold as merely a self-protection strategy—it conceals a darker and more traumatic experience of climate inertia.

As the functioning of the fantasy of normality not only aims to protect the ontological security of the individual, there is also a darker side to the fantasy itself. In this functioning of the fantasy, there is also the concealment of the more traumatic nature of climate change, something which has received increasing attention in the literature (e.g., Brulle & Norgaard, 2019; Massazza et al., 2022; Woodbury, 2019). The meaning of these literatures concerns the impact of climate change and the destructive effects on the livelihoods of people across the world as constituting a profound individual and collective trauma, through which people may cope by fantasizing. In this case, the absurdity of climate inertia points to the Lacanian Real, or the traumatic kernel or void that cannot be captured through authoritative discourse. This traumatic kernel of climate change does not only concern the existential crisis that unfolds as a result of climate change (Woodbury, 2019) but also the breakdown of life and society as such. The implications of climate change are simply too much to process, such a stressful crisis that the self-protective measures to ensure ontological security include the clinging on to the fantasy of normality and disavowal of absurdity in the face of the unspeakable and unforeseeable impact that is bestowed upon humanity. It is therefore not surprising to observe a process of mainstreaming climate change, whereby the status quo can be effectively maintained and the traumatic aspects of climate inertia are disavowed. In this mainstreaming, consumerist capitalism offers not only a way out of the trauma of climate change but also a way

to hypernormalize inertia itself. On the one hand, the individual can maintain one's lifestyle, production (i.e., working), and consumption patterns, without having to make necessary choices about altering one's behavior towards a greater balance between oneself and the environment. On the other hand, by living an eco-hedonist lifestyle, one no longer has to feel guilty for consuming: consumption can now be eco-friendly, with a green label. If one feels the pressing impact of climate change, the current capitalist lifestyles offer new choices: the old petrol car can be exchanged for an electric car without compromising on the luxury of modern forms of transportation. The electric car therefore exemplifies this very notion of what could be referred to as eco-capitalism (Guttmann, 2018): the possibility for the individual not having to compromise on any of one's preferred, luxurious lifestyle choices, to maintain one's fundamental belief in personal and material growth (Bal & Dóci, 2018), and continuing to engage in the capitalist system, but then in a way that it also saves the planet. This is similar to the notion of 'have your (vegan) cake and eat it': the individual is able to have *both*—ideological investment into neoliberal capitalism with all the material, self-centered growth and utility maximization, *and* effective responses to climate change through (responsible) consumption. It is not surprising to observe that such inconsistent duality can only function as a fantasy: after all, it is about the conjunction of two inherently paradoxical elements into one. Nevertheless, such inconsistency has been the very promise of liberal democracy for many decades: to have the raw capitalism with the celebration of the market economy, without its externalities, and the costs that had to be carried by the planet, the Global South, and all those on the receiving end of exploitative practices.

Notions such as 'green growth' or 'sustainable growth' (Hickel & Kallis, 2020) therefore remain firmly rooted in the notion of fantasmatic involvement into ideology, which offers individuals an escape from the traumatic Real of climate change/inertia. The notion that humanity is collectively failing to adequately respond to climate change, through which the impact of climate change will be much worse than when a form of global government would have found ways to radically decrease carbon emissions, has such a profoundly traumatic connotation that hypernormalization of climate inertia seems to be the most effective

individual mechanism or response at the moment. It is therefore that fantasy offers a productive and effective coping mechanism in the face of environmental destruction. Fantasy, therefore, is not an escape from the reality of climate change, but forms an ideological anchoring point through which reality itself is constructed. For many individuals, this remains the only viable way to survive, to live one's life and to find some individual meaning in life. Nonetheless, the limitations of fantasy are always omnipresent—when fantasy falls apart, the void or the cracks in the system may be revealed to the individual. It is therefore that fantasy and hypernormalization are effective only to a certain extent, as there is always the possibility of absurdity to emerge through hypernormalization, where the hidden is revealed and no longer invisible. Even though hypernormalization may exert an even stronger impact on absurdity concealment when an individual catches a glimpse of the absurd, it is no longer guaranteed that the absurdity remains hidden. In sum, internalization, fantasy and disavowal always remain functional to a certain extent and may be so for many people. However, similar to the Soviet Union state of hypernormalization, 'everything seemed forever, until it was no more' (Yurchak, 2005), the point in global society is being reached, whereby the certainties of the status quo become increasingly *overtly* absurd. This is also evident in scientific research, which has, for instance, shown a generational gap in climate change awareness (i.e., younger generations are more aware of climate change than older generations), but at the same time a general increase over time across generations (Milfont et al., 2021). It is indeed among younger generations that climate change awareness carries a more traumatic kernel, as it is these generations who will be affected profoundly by the lack of constructive climate behavior of their parents and grandparents. It is therefore not surprising to observe more maladaptive responses to climate change awareness.

The Absurd Climate Moment

As Camus (1942) described, a moment of revelation may be necessary to identify the absurdity of one's predicament. This 'absurd moment' may be experienced more often, especially among the younger generations

(Milfont et al., 2021), who have been raised in a rather unique period of climate change normalization, or the notion that the impact of climate change looms large over the lives of millions of young people worldwide. In response, it is not surprising to observe a rise in depression, mental health problems, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder in relation to climate change (Massazza et al., 2022). This is where the edifice falls apart, where a breakdown of ontological security unfolds into despair, and young generations may be especially prone to it, a process which was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wu et al., 2021), a pandemic which underscored the broken system of neoliberal capitalism. Yet, these symptoms such as despair and depression should be understood in the context of the larger systemic issues in which they have been generated. Ultimately, they constitute the responses to the absurd moment, the moment when one realizes the gravity of climate change and inertia. Fundamentally, this refers to the notion of climate change becoming *too* traumatic for the individual to sustain oneself in relation to the world, a maladaptive response little discussed by the original theorists on absurdity. While suicide was discussed (e.g., Camus, 1942) as a rather rational response to the absurdity of life, Camus also recognized that suicide rarely results from such experience of absurdity and can often be attributed to other causes. In contrast, we observe the absurdity of climate inertia to be corresponding with a range of symptoms of ill health. For instance, recent work has been conducted to understand recent climate-related social phenomena, such as eco-anxiety (Hickman, 2020; Panu, 2020), and eco-grief (Ágoston et al., 2022), the latter being a state of grief about the loss of environment and species, and the anticipation of future losses. This signals the disintegration of hypernormalization: younger generations have lost their faith, and some start blaming parents and society for hypernormalizing climate inertia. The interesting study by Hickman (2020) among children's experiences of climate anxiety reveals the naked emperor: it is children who are able to openly confront themselves with the more traumatic aspects of climate change and inertia, and at the same time see how the 'adult world' is failing them. Again, it is the children who expose absurdity and hypernormalization and offer a glimpse into unmasking the absurd.

While eco-anxiety, guilt, and grief may be on the rise, and especially among younger generations, it can also be observed how younger generations put such emotion into action: climate protests and demonstrations are on the rise as well, demanding governments, business, and citizens to take real action against climate change (Hayes & O'Neill, 2021). This is where the conceptual model of absurdity and hypernormalization meet its current limitations—perhaps climate change reaches its ‘Fall of the Wall’ moment, its unexpected moment from 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and signified the end of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain. This constituted a period of transition, of the disintegration of established patterns of hypernormalization, and where new forms emerge, and where new forms of authoritative discourse develop. Such ‘new’ authoritative discourse entails the acknowledgment that climate change has profound impacts and that it is government’s duty to address climate change. However, it remains speculation whether this discourse will relate meaningfully to newly developed really existing practices, and whether the rising climate -protest movements will be able to affect governmental decision-making. In other words, the question remains: what is to be done?

A Way Out of Hypernormalizing Climate Inertia

Given the societal hypernormalization of climate inertia and the individual-level internalization of fantasies of normality and disavowal of the impact of climate change are reaching their limits, the question is what the future will hold, and how absurdity and hypernormalization dynamics will unfold. The new climate protest movements, such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, have initiated new perspectives on the climate debate, opening up the debate on the hypernormalization of climate inertia and the ineffective responses provided by governments and business to climate change and the need to reduce pollution. While the subsequent chapter will address a more strategic and stepwise approach to ‘escaping’ hypernormalization, the current discussion aims to explore the variety of techniques used in these movements to spur debate and initiate action.

Generally, such protest movements are usually met with resistance from established elites, but also from more mainstream, silent majority, populations. Some examples, however, are relevant and interesting to highlight, in order to show how such dynamics unfold and how they fit within a framework of absurdity and hypernormalization (and resistance to it). For instance, the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement openly declares that ‘governments have failed to act’ (Extinction Rebellion, 2022). Hence, the very notion of the XR movement is based on an unmasking of the hypernormalization of governmental inertia towards climate change. However, it is frequently emphasized that the movement is about action rather than words only. On the website it states, ‘Traditional strategies like petitioning, lobbying, voting and protest have not worked due to the rooted interests of political and economic forces. Our approach is therefore one of non-violent, disruptive civil disobedience – a rebellion to bring about change, since all other means have failed’ (Extinction Rebellion, 2022). At various points on the website, this action is mentioned to be nonviolent, yet disruptive. It is nonviolent as it claims to be most effective when refraining from violence and damaging property while understanding that violence at times may be necessary (but not undertaken by XR). Yet, the movement aims to be disruptive, which could be witnessed in the events on 17 October 2019, when XR protesters disrupted the metro in London during rush hour, by, for instance, climbing on the roofs of the trains and gluing themselves to the doors of the trains (The Guardian, 2019). Commuters did not respond well to these actions, and angry travelers started fights with the protesters, who had to be rescued by the London Underground staff. After these events XR issued some apologies, stating that while the intentions of their actions were aimed at disrupting daily life, it should not lead to violence (such as was the case with angry commuters starting to fight with the protesters).

Similar events have been witnessed with the UK-based group ‘Insulate Britain,’ a protest movement which more specifically aims to draw attention to the need to insulate British homes, in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. On 13 September 2021 and following days, Insulate Britain protesters blocked various motorways around London to raise awareness among the British population of the need to better insulate

British homes, as fuel poverty forces ‘hundreds of thousands of families to choose between heating or eating’ (Insulate Britain, 2022). Protesters glued themselves to the motorway and caused disruptions. After many of the protesters had been arrested, various government figures, including prime ministers Boris Johnson, condemned the actions, and promised tougher penalties for those protesters disrupting infrastructure.

Both of these examples illuminate clearly the dynamics of absurdity and hypernormalization in the contemporary climate change debate, and how protests expose such absurdities. Both protest movements aim to disrupt the process of hypernormalization, or that what is taken for granted in society. Especially infrastructure as determining the fossil-fuel dominated landscapes offers the possibilities for problematization of the very notion of hypernormalization: these protest movements draw the attention to that what can be considered the invisible structures of absurdity in our societies. In this sense, infrastructure is continuously hyper-normalized as entirely ‘normal,’ taken for granted and accepted. In the UK, where these protest movements are also active, the infrastructure shows the dominance of the fossil-fuel-based society: roads meant for cars are prioritized above anything else, public transport has been struggling under decades of austerity, and cycling is generally considered to be one of the more dangerous means of transportation. It is therefore not surprising to observe that the targets of the protest movements have been aimed at disruption of the infrastructure. It is precisely these taken for granted aspects of society where insights are generated into hypernormalization when exposed. Transportation is one of the areas where a reduction of carbon emissions is strongly needed, but at the same time, it remains a sector purely driven by neoliberal doctrine (e.g., prioritization of global trade, production in ‘cheap’ countries in the Global South, tourism as economic driver). Therefore, both protest movements combine their goals (i.e., awareness of climate change and the need to insulate houses) with the more problematic areas in society that affect pollution.

While critiques have been uttered against both movements, these critiques have been primarily aimed at the disruptive effects on commuters in public transport (XR) versus disruption of car-based traffic. While the latter was directly targeted at those people who are driving cars, and therefore directly contribute to carbon emissions, this should not be

automatically favored vis-à-vis disrupting public transport: after all, it does not matter which people are targeted, as *everyone* is just as involved in hypernormalizing climate inertia, and as such, there is no better or worse audience to protest for/against. Nonetheless, the response from both law enforcement (usually arresting protesters for disruption of the efficient and smooth functioning of neoliberal society) and government constitutes direct resistance from the elite members of society against exposing absurdity: it once again shows the *dangerous* nature of absurdity, as exposing it will be directly met with legal implications. It also shows how the law functions: the law has little in common with environmental justice and as such is there primarily to protect the interests of the elite, and therefore to sustain hypernormalization.

The ways of contemporary climate protesting through disruption show support for the model presented in this book: such disruptions are threatening the ontological security of those who are affected by it—a situation of a traffic jam caused by climate protesters causes grave emotions among those in it: there are accounts of anger, frustration, violence, shouting, and so on. Such moments of conflict confront those affected with the absurdities of climate inertia, but they might or will disavow such confrontation: because it is too threatening, too much ontologically insecure, anger and denial take over to escape the more traumatic conclusion that the protesters unmask—that climate action is more strongly needed than one's very behavior in the moment. Hence, violent disavowal surfaces in those affected by the disruptions: it touches upon the traumatic aspects of our predicament, and the violent rejection serves to deny the very acknowledgment of this trauma.

Ultimately, climate action is more important than going to work, doing one's shopping, or visiting relatives or friends. Questions of effectiveness of such protests are irrelevant, as the denial of the relevance of a particular action is in the denial of the very goals of the movement: there is not a 'better strategy' that would not interrupt daily life of 'ordinary citizens,' but would be smoothly integrated, not being disruptive, and thereby to be safely and easily ignored. The disruption of one's very routine or plan for the day *is* the very necessary means through which their goals (e.g., climate awareness) are achieved. The governmental and law enforcement responses to such protests indicate the functioning of

hypernormalization, and thus that against which the protests are aimed. When governmental leaders condemn these protests, it also shows the emptiness of authoritative discourse, as the exposure of the gap between such discourse and really existing practices is by definition met with resistance. These protests also show a possible way out of hypernormalization, by taking discourse literally: the infiltration of XR's members into the headquarters of oil company Shell followed a statement by the UN General Secretary Guterres that fossil-fuel pollution should end (Guterres, 2022). This represents a case of taking authoritative discourse literally and filling it with bottom-up generated meanings (Yurchak, 2005). This way, authoritative discourse (such as by the UN General Secretary) does not remain empty in hypernormalizing the status quo while fantasizing about genuine commitment, but is used by these protest movements to generate change within society. If fossil-fuel pollution should be ended, as argued here by the highest UN representative, it means there is no place for companies such as Shell which are too strongly invested in maintaining the status quo while making billions of fossil-fuel profit annually.

Conclusion

In sum, this chapter argued that climate inertia is being hypernormalized and that, even though authoritative discourse is filled with 'genuine commitment' towards combatting climate change, global emissions are only on the rise, presenting little indication of a real change in carbon emissions. The absurdity of the destruction of the planet for economic profit extends to the devastating impacts of climate change which is currently unfolding across the world. It is also evident that global responses have been *too little, too late*. Framing climate inertia within a model of absurdity and hypernormalization helps to understand why the status quo is being normalized and perpetuated. Because climate change is already too traumatic, it is not strange to observe fantasy playing an important role in sustaining belief that commitment of our leaders is genuine and that appropriate action is being taken. Moreover, fantasy helps to deal with the more difficult questions around radically changing our ways of living

and acknowledging that perpetual growth is the problem rather than a solution. Fantasy helps to sustain beliefs in notions such as green growth, or the idea that it is possible to maintain one's lifestyle without having to compromise (e.g., use less energy, switch to vegan diets, stop flying). Ultimately, climate change poses a deeply traumatic process, from which many people, especially younger, are already suffering, including experiences of eco-anxiety and eco-grief. Easy ways out are not possible, and the resistance work of protest movements such as XR and Insulate Britain, and political parties such as the Green Party in the UK, and the Party for the Animals in the Netherlands, show that there are ways to engage in meaningful action and political work towards climate action and developing new, collective eco-friendly lifestyles. Nonetheless, there is little reason for hope, and it is perhaps time and there should be space to find courage in hopelessness (Žižek, 2018).

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9

A Way Out of Absurdity and Hypernormalization

Introduction

Is there a way out of absurdity and hypernormalization? Following the previous chapters, where we discussed the theoretical foundations of absurd social practices and the hypernormalization of such practices, the question is whether there are both theoretical and practical alternatives. Given the broad range of social practices that are pervaded by absurdity and hypernormalization, it is tempting to suggest that they are fundamental aspects of human life, and that life is simply absurd (as Camus holds), or that many social practices contain impossible paradoxes, which cannot be resolved. Yet, at the same time, the impossibility of the impossible paradox resides within the very same space where absurdity can be located—and as such, impossibility is a rather socially constructed phenomenon and not so much a ‘naturally’ emerging element. Throughout the book, we have identified a variety of concepts and ideas in relation to absurdity and the ways these become integrated into the core fabric of society, social practices, and what it is to be human as such. Identification as a particular human being, or identification with a particular social group, therefore, always carries the implication of the internalization of a

fantasy of normality. In other words, definition of what it is to be human is absurd as one seeks normality within a void that never appeared on the basis of a distinction normal-abnormal. Hence, as iterated before, there is no simple stepping out of absurdity and hypernormalization, so that enunciation and actual practice can be aligned better, and discourse to reflect more accurately really existing practice. While there is no natural order that determines normal-abnormal, at the same time, the absurdity of meaninglessness of life is by definition filled through the creation of such distinctions to guide human life. It is in this vein that over the last 400 years capitalism has been normalized as a guide to human life and ordering. Such normalization gradually de-normalizes any deviation from capitalist underpinning (while itself infiltrating non-democratic, authoritarian systems through finding the even greater fit between capitalism and authoritarianism; Brown, 2019). As alluded to before, 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Fredric Jameson), and hypernormalization is maintained through the need for 'everything to change so all can remain the same' (Tomassi di Lampedusa). These two dictums refer to both the lack of alternatives that contemporary society holds for neoliberal capitalism and the essential functioning of hypernormalization in the process of maintaining societal status quo under the illusion of action.

Given the sheer psychological violence that hypernormalization enacts upon citizens and individuals through creating a strong sense of hopelessness in the face of great societal challenges (Žižek, 2018), a call to step out of hypernormalization may be met with some cynicism as to its actual potential. Hence, hypernormalization is effective because its very construction defines its outcomes: the attempt to hypernormalize the status quo makes any alternative become suppressed, *abnormal*, and ridiculed. In this sense, it is also the trauma of Communism (Shafir, 2016) that haunts modern society: while the Communist-Socialist dream held the promise of an equal, non-exploitative, and dignified society, the actually existing terror of the Communist Soviet Union crashed the legitimacy of the left-wing project in creating a more equal society. It is therefore not surprising to observe the absurdity of the contemporary political divide existing between neoliberal-centrist politics and right-wing extremism: the left lost its cultural legitimacy after the collapse and moral

bankruptcy of Communism, and doubly lost its political legitimacy after uncritically embracing neoliberal values in the 1990s. In political terms, therefore, getting out of hypernormalization is not a matter of ‘returning’ to the political left, where an authentic striving towards a more equal society in which human and planetary dignity is prioritized can be savored.

We argue that there is no way out of hypernormalization towards some state of ‘normality’: the normal is already absurd in itself, and this provides a basis to not return to it. For instance, the escape from the Soviet Union from its absurd Communist system only led the Eastern Soviet countries into another form of absurdity in enforced neoliberal practices (see Klein, 2007). There is no ‘authentic’ state to return to, as all societal structures are socially constructed. In other words, in light of the socially constructed foundation of absurdity which has materialist effects on the dignity of the planet and people, it is not so much a matter of finding a more straightforward, direct relationship to our social constructions, but to entirely change our construction itself (Kilroy, 2019). To do so, we have to interrogate absurdity, understand it, problematize it, and embrace it, in truly Camusian ways. In the following sections, we will discuss in greater depths the individual and collective ways to do so.

Individual Ways Out of Hypernormalization

Albert Camus wrote about the absurd moment: that moment of revelation when an individual recognizes and acknowledges the absurdity of one’s predicament and one’s life. Such a moment of absurdity may entail a deep sense of anxiety and ontological insecurity (Hawkins, 2019), as it means a violent rupture of one’s certainties within the status quo, and raises the immediate question: what is to be done next? It is therefore not surprising that in such moments, hypernormalization is also functional, in denying the absurdity that already existed, or even at the level that one realizes that little, if not anything, can be done about the absurdity itself. Absurdity is therefore aligned with a total absence of hope (Camus, 1942; Hawkins, 2019). In this situation of hopelessness (Žižek, 2018), Camus advocates a rebellion against absurdity through embracing it. However,

Camus refrained from taking a more radical position, as the one his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre took in endorsing Communism and revolution to overthrow current capitalist systems. Camus advocated a more personal and peaceful rebellion, one that could be materialized, for instance, through the creative act (Camus, 1942; Davis, 2011; Hawkins, 2019). The embracing of absurdity entails a process of no longer denying the hypernormalization of absurdity in lieu of integrating the core inconsistencies and impossibilities of life into one's meaning systems. Embracing absurdity means that one no longer uses binary distinction between what is absurd, yet societally normative (and thus hypernormalized), and that which constitutes a 'reasonable alternative.' Absurdity transcends logic, and operates beyond that which is either a logic of the political right or political left and functions in a different dimension. It may be the case that these competing logics are of an impossible nature themselves, and jointly become absurd. For instance, the logic of fake news (i.e., deliberately creating untrue stories to manipulate public opinion) competes with 'factchecking' as popular with many liberal media. However, in the impotence of the latter to actually recognize that truth is not so much a static entity, but something that is reified in its own construction, a mirror reflection of fake news is created: fake news has a deep untruthful, absurdist nature in luring the individual into believing something that is pertinently a lie. Absurdity is also present in a counterpart element—the liberal-hegemonic attempt to normalize a particular, Western version of the truth that obfuscates the more contested notions of the Western 'civilization,' such as its inherent neo-colonial, anti-liberal, misogynist, racist, xenophobic, and supremacist tendencies. For the individual, the confrontation of oneself with the absurdity of social practice, of everything that makes up society, also spurs the need to critically reflect upon one's own behavior, one's own assumptions, and one's own very attitude towards this status quo. It may not be only a security that is found in the legitimacy of the hypernormal, a predictability of individual desire (i.e., compliance with the status quo in society provides an all-inclusive life, including direction about what one ought to fundamentally desire; Eysers, 2012; Žižek, 2006), but also the disavowal of the need to reflect upon oneself as an individual made up through life experiences which are fundamentally biased towards (some form of) privilege. The embracement of

absurdity, as something not merely relating to the meaninglessness of human existence, but to the very impossibility of alignment of the various paradoxical manifestations of social reality, seems more difficult than ever. As also alluded to by Melcher (2022), Camus' work was inherently biased, with, for instance, his example of Don Juan as the absurd hero. It is therefore (in hindsight) the exposure of the gap within the solution itself (i.e., Camusian's embracing of absurdity), that the exclusionary nature of this embrace is revealed, and thus its inherent limited practical value in society. In neglecting the misogyny underlying the portrayal of Don Juan as embracing absurdity, the question remains what the practical value is of a description of absurdity escaping through the embracing of it, and subsequently the creative act as exemplifying such escape. To what extent does this provide the individual with a clear implication out of the 'absurd moment'?

When an individual has a moment of revelation, when the skies become clearer to show the inconsistency, inappropriateness, and tragic element of an absurd social practice, it does not automatically lead hypernormalization to cease its functioning. The individual is now alone, in her or his wonder of the absurdity that one is surrounded with. It is far from self-evident that the individual suddenly moves on to 'embrace' absurdity, and consequently formulates an appropriate form of rebellion against hypernormalization. It is therefore that a process is needed that is more dialogical (Bal, 2017), a process that follows from the revelation of absurdity to the sharing with another individual or individuals. As absurdity concerns social practice, the individual has a limited number of options after recognizing the absurdity of such practice. First, the individual can maintain a position of compliance (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016), whereby one cynically accepts one's predicament considering absurdity: even though one is aware of the inconsistency of social practice, one maintains compliance due to maintaining ontological security (or bare survival). As explained earlier, fantasy may support one's position to retain consistency of one's beliefs: it may uphold the fantasmatic belief that while social practice may be absurd, nothing can be done, and that other powers, such as government, will act to remediate absurd social practice (rather than perpetuating it as a primary social actor). Second, the individual may engage in sense-making following the recognition of

absurdity's inherent 'strangeness' (Pfaller, 2012). Through estrangement, the individual may problematize social practice, and transform evidence into a question (Pfaller, 2012).

Hence, in line with Pfaller's (2012) interpretation of Žižek's work, estrangement becomes the necessary first step to start problematizing absurdity and hypernormalization. When social practice is continuously normalized, the question is how such estrangement can take place. In this regard, Bal (2017) points to the 'reversed logic of hypernormalization,' which is a strategy that follows estrangement. Reversed logic, according to Bal (2017), refers to the reversal of the logic underpinning hypernormalization: practically it can be used to observe practices in society (such as the increased militarization of many Western-European countries in response to terrorist attacks), followed by the question whether the *reversal* of such practices would lead to less or more (human, planetary) dignity. In other words, the provocative approach of reversed logic assumes that *asking* whether a complete reversal of a practice (e.g., whether in response to terrorist attacks a process of *de*-militarization would be more effective than the usual response of introducing and intensifying military presence on the streets, including a militarization of police) can be the starting point to the questioning and addressing of hypernormalization. To do so, Bal (2017, p. 272) argues for the following approach: hypernormalization should be exposed, with a special focus on the 'victims of hypernormalization'—those people whose dignity and resilience have been violated and harmed as a result of such hypernormalization. In our current description of absurdity, its tragic potential harms the dignity and resilience of individuals and/or the planet, and exposing such effects opens up the way for problematization of hypernormalization.

However, if the internalized protection mechanisms (e.g., fantasy, disavowal) against hypernormalization exposure are functioning, the question remains how absurdity can be exposed more effectively. As Kilroy (2019, p. 12) argues, 'we are now at a point where the act of demasking is actually fueling the ideological engagement.' With this, it is meant that exposing absurdity may even create a stronger hypernormalization, in both creating a feeling that nothing can be done and that it is merely a matter of individual survival and thriving (such as is the case with climate breakdown), and the creation of an illusion that action is being taken by

powerful actors in society, such as governments and businesses. Exposing absurdity, therefore, is never enough. Yet, at the same time, absurdity exposure remains the very first necessary step towards more meaningful change. How can the individual absurd moment be linked to more collective responses, which would be imperative in the context of effective hypernormalization response? To do so, individual estrangement (Pfaller, 2012) can become a mediator between collective problematization and collective responses, as individual estrangement can be just as strongly orchestrated as the hypernormalization process itself. In other words, a programmatic approach towards escaping absurdity can overcome the limitations of the low likelihood of individual estrangement. We will therefore now discuss the more collective responses to hypernormalization while focusing for each of these steps on the individual implications.

Collective Responses to Hypernormalization

Because of its inherent ideological dimension (Yurchak, 2005; Žižek, 2018), there is no mere stepping out of hypernormalization (Freeden, 2003). As Freedom (2003) argues: while everything has an ideological dimension, not everything is necessarily ideological. Hence, there is no real escape out of the hypernormalization ideology, and escaping such would only mean entering another ideological framework, in which other or quite similar fantasies prevail (Žižek, 1989). It is likely that awareness of absurdity creates ontological insecurity or a loss of sense of self (Kinnvall, 2004). Ideology provides a structure and maintenance of fantasy, and thereby the comfort of predictability (Jost et al., 2017). Awareness of hypernormalization is uncomfortable, as it involves a dramatic rupture with one's existing convictions and beliefs about the world (i.e., the recognition of a practice as absurd). Therefore, there is no straightforward way out of hypernormalization, not merely because it is primarily a social phenomenon that has grave personal-psychological dimensions, but because it always involves a radical breach from one's ontological security. We present four interrelated ways through which hypernormalization can be challenged in society: problematizing, resisting, imagining, and transforming. These four strategies are linked to each

other, such that usually problematizing is followed by resistance, and they build on each other. However, they are not purely perceived through a step-wise approach, thereby assuming that the later stages can only be followed when the previous ones have been ‘completed.’ In fact, problematizing constitutes a continuous process of reflexivity, whereby through change processes individuals and collectives continue to question the purposes and outcomes of our actions. Finally, we refer to these four strategies as a *verb* rather than a noun, as it should not be considered to be a rather stable entity (e.g., authoritative discourse is problematized), but as a continuous process, whereby the emphasis lies on the *doing* and on continuously engaging in these practices in order to affect social change.

Problematizing

The first necessary but insufficient step towards effectively challenging hypernormalization is problematizing particular instances of absurdity and hypernormalization in society and workplaces. Key to understanding the potential ways out of hypernormalization involves estrangement (Pfaller, 2012). Through such recognition, previously held assertions about the self-evident nature of certain practices in society and workplaces are transformed from evidence into a question. This can be done through exposing absurdity, in its illogical and inappropriate nature, and in its separation of reality from ideological inscription causing human suffering. When absurdity has tragic potential, its detrimental effects on human and planetary suffering can be exposed through research, activism, and politics. Such exposure functions against the hegemonic interpretation of absurdity and authoritative discourse, and thus involves the unmasking of that which is concealed. For instance, the work of Bal et al. (2021) around the neoliberal ideological underpinnings of the use of the concept of sustainable careers attempted to *expose* such hypernormalized hegemonic interpretation of authoritative discourse, which occurred at the expense of marginalized groups across global society who would never have the chance to obtain a sustainable career and are subject to a life of job insecurity and precarity. They argued and showed how a concept such as sustainable careers have become part of authoritative discourse, and

notwithstanding its neoliberal anchoring, retains a powerful appeal to scholars, practitioners, and workers. Exposing the neoliberal interpretation of sustainable careers, the authors concluded that sustainable careers have become interpreted as an individual responsibility of workers, while typically marginalized groups in society (autistic employees, immigrant workers, etc.) have been excluded from obtaining such a sustainable career.

Problematizing absurdity therefore helps people to recognize its strangeness. The very act of doing so constitutes the first step towards getting out of hypernormalization. One crucial difference between the Soviet Union's hypernormalization and contemporary Western society concerns freedom of speech in the sense that problematization of the absurd can be conducted more openly, and thereby exposed more widely to people. The creative ways through which people in the Soviet Union were forced to manage the gap between authoritative discourse and practice are both similar and different to contemporary Western society. While living in the Soviet Union always carried the risk of being arrested and put into prison, modern society exerts its influence on citizens in different ways. It is therefore that problematizing absurdity and hypernormalization has more potential in contemporary society. With the rise of the internet, problematizing has even become more accessible to wider audiences and remains the crucial first step towards social change. The Occupy Movement from 2011, the #MeToo Movement from 2017, and the Black Lives Matter Movement rising in 2020 have shown that by exposing the absurdities of the economic and exploitative system, the prevalence of sexual harassment in society, and the inequalities and racism towards Black and non-White people, these issues can be effectively addressed within society.

However, at the same time, problematizing may unfold in a space that is not merely captured by critical voices emphasizing the dignity of people and the planet but also captured by critical voices resulting from the fear that surrounds society (Fromm, 1941). It is therefore not the case that exposing absurdity is sufficient in changing social circumstances—such exposure is always embedded within the process of hypernormalization itself, and as such always risks to be hypernormalized. For instance, it is possible to expose that sustainable careers are, in fact, a myth and resulting from a fantasy about workers achieving sustainable careers,

while neoliberal ideology keeps on constituting the very essence of sustainable careers itself through emphasizing the instrumentality and individualism underpinning it (Bal et al., 2021). However, this does not mean such exposure is effective, as people may use psychological mechanisms to deny the very nature of what exposure entails. Hence, exposure of absurdity may as well lead to strengthening of hypernormalization, as people may escape absurdity by clinging on to their ontological security and seek ways that actually strengthen absurdity rather than contesting it.

Art-Based Problematizing

Estrangement of absurdity can also be achieved through acceptance of absurdity itself. There are various art-based expressions of how absurdity is dealt with through acceptance and immersing oneself into the absurd (Cornwell, 2016). Because absurdity does not concern itself with truth statements (Foroughi et al., 2019), it is insufficient to merely expose the untruthful nature of absurdity. However, absurdity can be exposed through taking it one step further, by, for instance, a 'naïve,' literal reading of authoritative discourse (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). This classical approach was used by authors like Hašek (with protagonist Soldier Švejk) and Voinovich in the Soviet Union (with protagonist Ivan Chonkin). Through a literal reading of authoritative discourse and the staging of naïve protagonists who internalize this discourse, the system is exposed in its absurd manifestation. Such literal reading of authoritative discourse exposes the absurd nature of discourse itself in describing actually existing manifestations, thereby also exposing the dangerous nature of the absurd: in the void of absurd meaninglessness (of discourse), suddenly the space emerges in which alternative interpretations may be formed. It is this approach that could be understood as the escape *into* absurdity, a deliberate attempt not to resign to a mythical counterpart of absurdity in which reason prevails, where singular truths based on reason and logic can be maintained, but where the absurd absence of logic is embraced, in order to find that alternative space where absurdity fully resides and where this is something that could be transformed into a constructive process of dignity protection. It may be a case of 'creative

reinterpretation' of authoritative discourse into bottom-up generated new meanings, as Yurchak (2005) showed in his research. This entails a hijacking of discourse by those with seemingly little or no power, through using authoritative discourse in a way that fundamentally dissociates itself from the emptiness of this discourse as rendered meaningless in relation to really existing practices. Such escape into absurdity of meaningless discourse may expose the inherent meaninglessness, but may also provide opportunities for creative reinterpretation. For instance, in the space where sustainability becomes an empty concept, it is a question of finding new meanings for sustainability that are properly radical and move beyond hegemonic status-quo-driven interpretation.

This escape *into* absurdity may have a twofold effect. For instance, the movie *Joker* (2019) is described as an escape into absurdity, where the character of the Joker is the very product of an absurd society, whereby absurdity is exposed through its doubling-up, albeit with the destructive force of violence. The central premise of the movie (and related to the Batman series) is that the Joker holds the deeper lying truths about Gotham city (i.e., modern American society), such as its raw capitalist, excluding nature, through which suffering is common. The Joker exposes such absurdity, but does so not only by doubling-up through an even deeper engagement with absurdity in all its violent potential and thus unleashing this violent potential of absurdity that was always there, but then which existed only in a more hidden form, in the void of society. However, in using extreme violence to expose absurdity (which is reminiscent of Burgess' *Clockwork Orange*), dignity and resilience are also absent, through which absurdity is merely confirmed in its meaninglessness. In the absence of a counterpart to absurdity, the escape into absurdity does not do more than exposing it, while finding perverse enjoyment in it.

Another way absurdity is exposed is through comedy (Cornwell, 2016), which *again* may have ambiguous effects. On the one hand, the 'traditional' role of comedy as exposing the absurdities in society may lose its constative meaning in merely reproducing the absurdity itself. During the Trump presidency in the USA (2017–2021), many satirical US television shows merely addressed the clownish nature of the president, without exposing the more deep-seated ideological nature of this façade of the

clown as president. In this sense, comedy may act as exposure-as-distraction: while pointing towards the absurd nature of contemporary sociopolitical manifestations and enunciations, it also legitimizes the status quo without exposing the underlying principles that give rise to the manifestations of absurdity. It also legitimizes through its underlying message which is usually aimed at making fun of the powerful in society but also accepting their status and the general status quo as how things really are. A comedy-example that does challenge such ideological assumptions is that of academic Edina Dóci (2019), who takes an absurdity-squared approach, whereby the absurdity of contemporary society is taken to the extreme. By (again) adopting a literal reading of its authoritative, ideological, discourse, she subsequently reverses it through using reproduction of form (e.g., by performing her comedy as an academic lecture or as a Ted-Talk) to unmask ideological absurdity (cf. the popular Facebook blog 'The Man Who Has It All,' where gender stereotypes are reversed onto men which effectively does the same). The result of such absurdist comedy is a genuine reflection upon the very assumptions of ideological discourse, both in society and academia. Thereby, comedy may not just act as a legitimization of the status quo but also as a catalyst in the process of problematizing absurdity.

However, such problematization is not yet sufficient to change hypernormalized practices. As argued before, it is even the privileged elites from the World Economic Forum (2019), who are now problematizing income inequalities. This is partly because absurdity risks being hijacked by those who have invested in retaining hypernormalization as it benefits those in power. While awareness of absurdity can be remediated through cynical disavowal and ideological internalization, it is therefore needed to link resistance to problematization.

Resisting

A second necessary, yet in itself insufficient, strategy concerns the role of resisting absurdity. While hypernormalization has to be problematized through recognition of its strangeness (e.g., through, for instance, exposing its detrimental effects on the dignity and resilience of people and the

planet), it is also needed that people actively resist such practices. Recent academic literature has revalued the role of resistance again in bringing about social change (Contu, 2018; Derber, 2017; Weinberg & Banks, 2019). Resistance is necessary as problematization in itself is unlikely to change social reality; it is needed to actively resist hegemonic ideology which facilitates absurdity to manifest and perpetuate. Contu (2018) speaks in this context of ‘parrhesiastic’ activism, or the notion of speaking truth to power. Resistance can manifest both individually or collectively, and hidden or public (Mumby et al., 2017), and aims to address the use of power to subordination. Within Soviet Union hypernormalization (as still is the case within contemporary Russia), resistance became more and more dangerous due to the risks of being incarcerated. Open resistance against the regime became impossible, and therefore, other forms of resistance were needed. One such form appeared through the creative reinterpretation of the constative dimension of authoritative discourse (such as a revaluing of collectivity in one’s community) while engaging in the performative rituals of the Communist system. Yurchak’s (2005) research presented various examples of how individuals engaged in the enforced rituals, such as taking part in Communist Party meetings and playing one’s role in such meetings. At the same time, however, there was an implicit common understanding among the people of the meaninglessness of such meetings in building and developing society. For example, while such meetings were obligatory, individuals actively searched for creative ways to reinterpret Communist ideals such as solidarity and collectivity into constative meanings that actually built relationships with others.

Similarly, performativity is often enforced in Western society, whereby individuals have to comply, such as is the case with bureaucracy in organizations (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Alvesson & Szkuclarek, 2021). For individuals working in organizations or finding their way in modern society, it is not so much a matter of displaying overt resistance against the increased bureaucratization, but being enforced to comply with the bureaucracy at the risk of exclusion. In other words, individuals have little choice than to participate in the rituals of contemporary existence, rituals that have a strong constitutive meaning in distributing valuable resources. For instance, unemployment forces individuals to engage in the increasingly bureaucratized and absurd unemployment benefits

system. Refusing to do so simply means that one will lose the right to benefits, and therefore there is no real choice here than to make the (neo-liberal) ‘right choice.’ Similarly, participation in democracy has become a ritual as well, whereby the choice between political parties has become the choice of different flavors of neoliberalism (Brown, 2019), in either the choice between liberal democracy or authoritarian populism. In such moments, for many people, the only form of resistance is by not showing up, by retreating from participating in the democratic system at all. This is reminiscent of the novel *Seeing* (originally *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*) by Jose Saramago, in which 83% of the populace cast blank ballots in a parliamentary election. The confused government quickly retreats to implementing something similar to a police state to control the silent population, who has chosen to distance itself from the façade of the democratic electoral system. In a similar vein, this is shown in the story *Bartleby* by Herman Melville, where Bartleby, a clerk to a Wall Street lawyer, refuses to carry out tasks, while saying he ‘would prefer not to’ (carry out any task). As Žižek (2009, p. 342) argues, such refusal to participate, either in the electoral system or work, is the necessary first step towards changing social circumstances, as it clears the ground for an act that will truly lead to transformation. Resisting through non-participation, therefore, can mean an important step in the process of addressing absurdity and hypernormalization. Hence, it is either within such constraints of the system that resistance can be generated through non-participation, or through more collective forms, where individuals benefit from their participation within a group in society, in order to protest against the destructive nature of absurdity and hypernormalization.

Yet, resistance in itself is insufficient to address and change hypernormalized practices. For instance, the Gilet Jaune (Yellow Vest) Movement in France originated in 2018 as a protest against rising fuel prices (which caused many liberal environmentalists not to sympathize with the movement) and led to resistance across Europe (Masquelier, 2021). However, while this resistance movement initially protested against rising fuel prices, a lack of problematization underpinned the movement. These protests concerned a resistance against the hegemonic order, but without a clear problematizing of the hypernormalization that caused the unrest

and frustration. Absurdity exposed itself here, as the French neoliberal government imposed so-called environment taxes which would affect the most vulnerable people (while, for instance, the airlines remained excluded from fuel taxation). This led to people protesting *against* (a rather incremental form of) climate action. Absurdity emerged here in the impossible choice for people between climate action and economic survival, thereby pretending that the two were fundamentally unrelated to each other. At the same time, the French government responded with military intervention, delegitimizing a debate on the link between environmentalism and emancipatory economics (for the poor). Nonetheless, the lack of success of the movement can be partly attributed to the lack of problem identification, as well as a lack of alternatives that are necessary to successfully counter hypernormalization.

Finally, as argued by Brookes in Chap. 7 of this book, absurdity and the hypernormalized state is held in place by systems of power, including elites in society who have carefully crafted and shaped the neoliberal state that dictates the primacy of free markets, *Homo economicus*, and economic profit in running and structuring society. Such neoliberal ideology is consequently internalized through ideological fantasy (e.g., Bal et al., 2021), and resistance is therefore needed in relation to the elites maintaining the hypernormalized status quo in society as well as the resisting in the spirit of Bartleby: by saying no to the performative rituals of neoliberal ideology, new possibilities are emerging to resist the status quo and to start formulating and creating the necessary first steps to get out of the hegemonic neoliberal ideology, imposed and enforced through corporatization of the entire society.

Imagining

Lack of alternative is a strong driver behind hypernormalization dynamics. It also explains the persistent nature of hypernormalization; people in the former Soviet Union dreamed of Western life (Yurchak, 2005). Contemporary society lacks such a comparative perspective, contributing to inertia and compliance (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). In addition to problematizing and resisting, imagining is therefore needed to bring

about change. Žižek (2009) and Kilroy (2019) therefore advocate a *parallax view*, which entails the formulation of *radical* alternatives. A parallax view consists of taking a radically different perspective, and to remove oneself from the narrow binary distinction present in society. For instance, in formulating a response to fake news, it is not a matter of belief in facts, and in response to climate change, it is not a matter of believing in the fantasy of green growth to eradicate the impossibility of aligning economy and eco-logy in contemporary society. Adopting a parallax viewpoint means to fundamentally break away from absurdity, and not by merely trying to expose the falsehood of absurdity. Exposing absurdity as 'post-truth' (Foroughi et al., 2019) would implicitly assume that there is a 'rational' opposite of absurdity which is appealing in itself (e.g., a fantasy of a return to purposeful, efficient bureaucracy in organizations). It is therefore needed to formulate alternative visions of reality that may provide a way out, or a way for people to construct a more 'livable' position (Žižek, 2018) that protects the dignity of people and the planet (Bal, 2017). This includes the formulating and providing of new forms of ontological security (Kinnvall, 2004; Mitzen, 2006). As problematizing and resisting without imagining of alternatives only create or enhance ontological *insecurity*, it is imperative that a more fruitful way out of hypernormalization is to create new visions for identity-formulation and collective solidarity, and thus new forms of ontological security for people in society and workplaces.

Imagining involves the creation of 'new fantasies,' as absurdity is ultimately about a fantasy about societal order. Žižek argues that 'we are responsible for our dreams' (Žižek & Fiennes, 2011), and as such, we are responsible ourselves for creating and formulating new fantasies, in which the dignity of all people and the planet itself is respected, protected, and promoted (Bal, 2017). For instance, bureaucracy entails a fantasy of the smoothly functioning and efficient organization, which may become absurd when the application of its bureaucratic procedures on people are normalized and thereby become destructive. In response, imagining involves the dreaming of alternatives, and formulating counter-narratives of how authoritative discourse in society could obtain new constative meanings, providing new forms of ontological security to individuals and collectives.

One more mundane way through which ontological security may be protected is through engagement into the performative dimension of an ideology of absurdity (e.g., through participation in bureaucracy), while, at the same time, finding creative ways of reinterpreting hegemonic discourse into meaningful action. Such dual engagement is alike practices of individuals in the Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2003, 2005) and may have greater importance than initially recognized. Key to such endeavors is the combination of problematizing, resisting, and imagining, as they may jointly form the antidote to the reproduction of absurdity and a way to which creative reinterpretations of constative dimensions become materialized.

Creative Reinterpretation

A primary way through which imagining may be linked with current (absurd) practice concerns the role of creative reinterpretation of authoritative discourse (Yurchak, 2003, 2005). For individuals, resistance may prove challenging, and other ways to undermine absurdity and hypernormalization may be in need. Being part of the triad problematizing-resisting-imagining, creative reinterpretation may follow from the observation of social practices to have become absurd. However, in the impossibility for individual open resistance against absurdity, people might refrain from acting out their unwillingness to engage in absurdity and hypernormalization. It is therefore that in imagining alternative modes of behavior, a straightforward approach lies within the creative reinterpretation of authoritative discourse. In other words, society is continuously bombarded with discourse that is inherently appealing, yet opposed to actually existing practice (just as was the case in Soviet Union). It is therefore possible to employ a more literal reading of discourse and find creative and innovative meanings that contribute to greater dignity. For instance, concepts such as sustainability have lost their meaning, being anchored in a variety of interpretations, but generally being hijacked by neoliberal discourses (i.e., sustainability can only function instrumentally to economic goals; Brown, 2019). Hence, sustainability can be considered an inherently empty concept, which is filled

ideologically through authoritative discourse. Creative reinterpretation of the concept, however, may present new possibilities for an actually existing meaning of sustainability (Bal & Brookes, 2022). Therefore, the concept of sustainability can be 'liberated' from its inherent ideologically empty nature, and interpreted much more radically, through ways that conceptualize sustainability *only* when it contributes to greater dignity of people and the planet. In such cases, it is not necessarily needed to get rid of these concepts, and invent new ones, as these new concepts risk the very same hijacking of their meaning to fit ideological discourse (as also happened to inequality, which was stripped of its radical meaning through adoption by institutions such as the World Economic Forum). Instead, it is about saving such concepts in a way that they become interpreted more radically, in the sense that they contribute to respect for, protection of, and promotion of greater dignity in workplaces and society (notwithstanding the meaning of dignity itself being hijacked ideologically).

Experimentation may play a central role, whereby engagement in the performative dimension is conducted at the minimum level of necessity and in a way that authoritative discourse becomes meaningless. For instance, in an organizational bureaucracy where employees continuously have to fill in forms, these forms can be provided with the same reproduced, meaningless content that act as empty signifiers that nonetheless fulfill the bureaucratic desire for content. At the same time, individuals may experiment with new ways of organizing and collaborating *beyond* bureaucracy, through informal organizations within the formal structures (see, e.g., Parker et al., 2014). Such experimentation may provide meaning locally, but may also give rise to more collective forms of solidarity, meaning-making, and collective action to spur change in society and workplaces.

Transforming

Ultimately, scientific research finds its value in linking with actual practice in society. Problematizing, resisting, and imagining are strategies to inform the practice of absurdity normalization in society, and in doing so, new avenues are created for change in society and workplaces.

However, at the same time, change may be less real than sometimes seems the case in society. Addressing absurdity invites for a transformation process to take place, not merely to step out of ideology, as discussed above, but to engage in a process of unmasking the ideological and fantasmatic underpinnings of reality constructions, which ignores the more traumatic aspects of hypernormalization. Transforming means to change oneself, one's environment, and establish collective means to effectuate change. While contemporary society tends to prioritize personal change beyond societal change (or disavowing the likelihood of societal change entirely), the question is how contemporary forms of collective action may be undertaken in order to mitigate the undignifying principles underpinning absurdity. This calls for more collective responses to absurdity, and thereby moving beyond Camusian individual-focused response towards a more Sartre-based radical notion of societal change, which nonetheless has to remain based within principles of dignity (Bal, 2017). In any case, transformation is a process that unfolds through collective effort, and as such transcends the individual. To be able to exemplify the process of transforming through collective effort, we will discuss the rise of the Future of Work and Organizational Psychology (FoWOP) Network from 2017 onwards, a collective of academics in the field of work and organizational psychology trying to change the rising neoliberalism of academia.

Transforming Academia: FoWOP and the Struggle Against Neoliberal Academia

How does transformation take place in workplaces and society? Faced with the hypernormalization of neoliberal academia (Ball, 2012; Parker, 2018), a small group of academics in the field of work and organizational psychology gathered in 2017 at the biannual EAWOP conference, which took place in Dublin, Ireland. EAWOP is the professional association of academic work psychologists in Europe, and therefore, the main body representing the interests of academic work psychologists, and organizing biannual conferences primarily for academics, but also attended by practitioners. This small group of 12 academics organized an interactive panel discussion on the future of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP),

as the organizers felt that while academic conferences took place regularly, they were never the site of actual discussion on the future of the field and the roles of scholars in advancing the field. Moreover, it also came across to the organizers that scholars in the field seemed to express little agency over their own work environments. There was little, if not any, discussion among academics and at the conferences about the future of the discipline, and how academics wanted to play a role in contributing to the future of work (an upcoming ‘hot topic’ in popular media and academia alike). The interactive 1.5-hour debating session attracted a group of 60 participants, of which about a third constituted practitioners. As stated in the original proposal submitted to the conference, the first purpose of the session was to expose how cultural, economic-political, and societal factors affect work psychology. Moreover, the proposal described as an important purpose to promote more critical and humanistic perspectives in the field and, finally, to discuss how the academic structures and cultures related to aforementioned questions. Pertinent to the session were the observations that the field of work psychology has little meaning towards practice beyond perpetuating the (neoliberal) status quo (Bal, 2015), that the field of WOP had developed a culture that allowed only positivistic, realist perspectives on the psychology of work (Symon & Cassell, 2006), and whereby other ontologies and epistemological orientations were excluded. Beyond all, a shared observation pertained to the rather masochistic nature of (academic) work of psychologists, who would merely submit to the structures imposed upon them, and who seemingly lacked any real agency to affect changes to one’s own environment and the academic world in extension (Baritz, 1960; Fromm, 1955). Such submissive attitude was widely shared, whereby perceptions dominated that one should merely try to fit in, join the hypercompetition within academia to ensure an academic career and thus, retrospectively, to accept and comply with the inner and inherent absurdities within the academic system. The session proved to be a first moment of transformation, where academics and practitioners from across Europe found a space to share their experiences of working in the field of WOP and academia more widely. At the same time, the proposal and the session were aimed to start a process of changing circumstances in the academic world, and the proposal stated that the session should be followed

up with meetings and further work on this theme. The session proved to be one of the first structured ones in the history of EAWOP conferences where a collective of academics and practitioners were offered the possibilities to *problematize* existing practices and cultures within the discipline. Through the form of brief five-minute presentations by the panel (on the topics of methodology, humanistic concerns, the relation with practice, and the purpose of scientific publishing), small-group discussions, and a joint interactive panel discussion, the session offered an opportunity for problematization and a first articulation of ways for the participants to start resisting against neoliberal academia and to very preliminary start to imagine alternative ways of organizing academia. Nonetheless, given the novelty of the session in the (perhaps rather conservative and mainstream driven; Fromm, 1955) discipline of WOP, the session also meant a first possibility of problematizing the absurdity of the contemporary academic world (see also Bal, 2017, Chap. 8).

After the successful session, four of the organizers (Edina Dóci, Yvonne van Rossenberg, Xander Lub, and Matthijs Bal) gathered and initiated the follow-up to the session, and started to organize a Small Group Meeting (SGM) on the Future of WOP, for which funding from EAWOP would help to cover organizational costs. Benefits of the organizing team included their physical proximity—the organizers lived and/or worked in the Netherlands and Belgium, through which the organizing would not have to take place solely online, but provided the opportunities for the organizers to meet and prepare in the best possible way. The SGM took place in Breda, the Netherlands, in May 2018. While SGMs were funded on the basis of small groups of scholars gathering to present and discuss on a specific topic (<25 individuals), the popularity of the SGM and the stated inclusiveness of the meeting meant that 50 scholars eventually joined the SGM. The meeting was organized from scratch in a way that each aspect and detail of the conference was aimed at delivering a meaningful contribution to the future of WOP. Dissociating from the established norms (i.e., what would be considered ‘normal,’ or hypernormalized at academic conferences), the organizers sought to find ways to meaningfully engage with the topics of the SGM. For instance, the organizers questioned the effectiveness and meaning of the 10-minute presentation, 5-minute discussion format that was prevalent at academic conferences.

While it offered individuals the chance to present their research, the discussion time would never allow a meaningful engagement with the topic, and the space for more fundamental discussion. From a more critical perspective, it could also be explained as a rather intentional and deliberate strategy to maintain the hypernormalized status quo, as academic conferences would provide academics a perception of a space for sharing and meaning (e.g., usually academic conferences in WOP and management would have themes closely aligning with authoritative neoliberal discourse, such as 'Dare to Care' or 'Working for the Greater Good'), while at the same time *not* offering any structured space for fundamental debate and critique. A widely shared observation pertained to the role of informal chats during coffee breaks and informal dinners, which academics would often value strongly over the official program, as it provided them opportunities for discussion, networking and friendships.

For the SGM, the organizers wanted to break down this perceived meaninglessness of the actual program and bring meaning back into it. Distancing from the presentation-brief discussion format, led by PowerPoint presentations, the organizers developed a wide variety of interactive formats, and fitted submitted abstracts from the 50 participants into a 2.5-day program. This way the actual meaning found in the non-scheduled parts of a conference was brought to the fore, and while retaining the value of these unscheduled meetings (e.g., the meaningfulness of the chats during the coffee breaks), the organizers reduced radically the time for presentation in lieu of interactive discussion and even Serious Lego Games were played to visualize the academic system and how to make changes within the system. The SGM lasted for 2.5 days from Wednesday morning to Friday morning, in order to allow participants the time to travel back home on Friday afternoon, and not to give up their weekends for academic conferences, which is so often the case (thereby presuming that academics would automatically favor spending time at academic conferences over non-work activities, including spending time with family in the weekend). The SGM was successful and the activities led to fundamental discussion among the participants about the discipline, the state of academia, and one's role in this system. Building on interactive activities such as the collecting of the academic values of one's work via post-its and ordering and categorizing them to visualize

shared collective values, the meeting brought a significant number of people together. Hence, the meeting allowed the space to discuss in much more depth the problems that academics in WOP face, and thus the possibility of a deeper and more fundamental problematizing of the absurdity of contemporary neoliberal academia. Two observations were pertinent during the meeting. First, while some participants had been drawn primarily to the theme of the SGM (Future of Work and Organizational Psychology), not all of the participants were ready to make the 'jump' from the conventional format of the academic meeting towards a highly interactive format, in which the active participation formed the essential ingredient of the program. While conventional academic conferences allow the academic to sit back and passively join, or do something else during academic presentations (such as checking emails on the phone), the SGM required active *participation*. Hence, during the SGM, there appeared a split between the majority who did so, while a small minority of individuals 'resigned' from the idea behind the meeting.

Second, the time dimension proved to be especially relevant in the success of the SGM. While most international but also the Netherlands-based participants had arrived on the Tuesday prior to the SGM, the intense program meant an accumulation of fatigue among the participants. Due to the highly participatory nature of the program, there was less time to 'sit back and relax'—perhaps also mirroring the need to become actively engaged in changing neoliberal academia, as there is simply no easy way out. However, the accumulation of fatigue among the participants also meant a build-up of meaning: during the Friday morning plenary session, aimed at discussing the next steps for the collective, various participants shared their own emotional stories of surviving academia, stories of struggle, discrimination, and the psychological violence inherent within the contemporary academic system. Fatigue helped to break down the barriers among the participants, to openly share stories, cry, and find a home for personal sharing in academic meetings. This also showed how problematizing absurdity can never manifest purely as an academic debate, in which rational arguments about the irrationality of the system lead to a deeper truth: it is via the transcending of the illogical into genuine emotion that an opening was created into the personal experience, into what it means to be human in academia. Stories of

struggle did not only open up the ways for problematizing contemporary academia but also provided a first insight into resisting the academic system and introducing the idea that ‘things could go different.’

During the meeting, four themes became central in the need for the collective network to pursue in greater depth in the future. These included (1) the need for more critical perspectives in WOP; (2) the promotion of equality in academia and the fighting against various forms of inequalities, including gender and ethnic inequality; (3) the protection of health and well-being in academia; and (4) building more plurality in methods employed in WOP. It was decided that the four themes would be prioritized in future work and that it would be necessary to capture the outcomes of the SGM in a document not just reflecting the insights from the discussions and activities but also displaying the agency that academics have in changing the circumstances of our system. While the participants were dissatisfied with the inertia within the academic institutions when it came to addressing the inherent problems of neoliberal academia, there was a shared perception that more active participation in the change process would be needed. At the same time, the participants also felt the privilege of having been at the SGM, and the need to share the outcomes more widely among the academic community, in order to not only inform others who could not attend of the outcomes of the meeting but also build a larger network across WOP to initiate meaningful change.

The 2018 SGM proved to be the starting point of a new network or movement of academics within WOP, which would be called FoWOP (Future of Work and Organizational Psychology). A website was launched prior to the SGM (www.futureofwop.com) to facilitate communication with participants and interested others. The four organizers of the SGM would continue to run the network and initiate the outcomes of the meeting and set up taskforces for each of the four themes, of which both participants and others could be part of. The network and the taskforces would be democratically run, even though there was also an assessment among the organizers that as FoWOP did not constitute a ‘real’ network as such yet, that it would be needed to be more directive in the early stages, to initiate activities, outcomes and first direction for the taskforces. Such a ‘non-democratic’ start of the network could be perceived in line with Lenin’s retreat to the New Economic Policy in 1921 in which a form

of capitalism was introduced and where dogmatic Communist principles could be perceived to have been betrayed (Garcia, 2021). However, in contrast to the New Economic Policy, which would be transformed in authoritarianism and terror under Stalin, the FoWOP network carried its values from the beginning: as alluded to above, the SGM centralized the values underpinning academic work and life, as generated by the participants themselves (including values such as openness, integrity, collaboration). This provided a framework for members of the network to identify with, and a guidance for the organizers to continue their efforts in building the network.

As there was a shared perception that the outcomes of the meeting should be spread more widely, three of the organizers collaborated on the development of the ideas towards a Manifesto for the Future of Work and Organizational Psychology. On the basis of the sessions, outcomes, and notes made during the SGM, the authors developed a first outline and draft for a FoWOP manifesto, outlining the responsibilities of researchers in WOP. On the basis of the SGM, the organizers felt it imperative to explicitly refer to the duties and responsibilities that we have as academics. Even when suffering under the restrictive circumstances that neoliberal academia had created, academics still have the privilege of their intellect to problematize the absurdities of the system (e.g., Contu, 2018; Girschik et al., 2022). While the small group drafted the outline of the manifesto, all participants to the SGM were invited to co-author the manifesto, in order to make use of the strength of the collective group of academics, enabling more collective and collaborative work for a more humane future for WOP. While the main writing of the manifesto was conducted by a small group of authors, the process itself proved another way to bridge problematizing and imagining. For example, through large-scale authoring of academic papers, the competitive nature of academic publishing was problematized and resisted through the ‘hacking’ of the system. Additionally, for many individuals taking part in the co-authoring of the manifesto, the publication of it also contributed to their own career as it fulfilled their university’s perverse demand for publications in academic journals. Nonetheless, ethical practice was also taken into account in order to avoid compromising on the contribution of each author: authorship could only be ‘earned’ through proper contribution to

the development of the manifesto. This way, the first authors drafted the various versions of the manifesto, on which about 30 other co-authors provided their input. The input was collected by the first authors and they drafted a new version on the basis of these inputs. Going through several rounds of writing and rewriting of the manifesto was conducted until a version that was deemed 'submittable' was reached. Through the writing of an academic paper with 33 authors, we also dissociated from the usual post-submission peer-review system, and implemented a system of pre-submission peer review, obtaining around 30 peer reviews including input from the total author team. Input from the authors differed on the basis of time available and expertise in the area of writing academic papers, and ranged from minor comments on the text to extensive input on the ideas included.

In close collaboration with the editor of the European Journal of WOP, the academic journal associated with EAWOP, and the EAWOP President, the group was able to publish the manifesto in the journal, with an introduction from the EAWOP President (Anseel, 2019; Bal et al., 2019). It constituted a landmark piece in the development of the network, and quickly after the publication of the manifesto, the authors opened up a possibility to 'sign' it, with the possibility to attach one's name to the 10 principles presented in the Manifesto (<https://www.futureofwop.com/manifesto>). This strengthened the connection of individual researchers with the Manifesto. It was also distributed widely, and has been downloaded over 18,500 times on the publishers' website (being offered open access due to the University of Lincoln making funds available for 'Gold Open Access') and Researchgate (notwithstanding downloads from the other platforms, such as personal websites and institutional repositories and informal distribution). The Manifesto proved to be a statement not only of problematizing the absurdities of WOP as a field or scientific practice and institutional practices, but also a space for imagining the roles of the academic work psychologist in the university, and more broadly the role of universities in a more dignified system. Heavily based on earlier work of the authors, the Manifesto emphasized the role of human dignity and workplace democracy in transforming the university to become more sustainable for the future. The Manifesto also guided the various taskforces in their work to pursue change within specific areas of

the academic environment and academic practices, including the inclusion of more critical perspective in WOP and using the expertise of WOP to contribute to healthier academic workplaces.

Various initiatives followed the publication of the Manifesto, including the activities within the taskforces and the organization of a FoWOP Day at the EAWOP conference in 2019 in Turin, Italy. Over the years, the network grew to a membership of 300+ academics within WOP, who actively contributed to the taskforces or passively supported the activities and goals of the network. The rapid growth of the network also led to coordination problems, with the small group of initiators (i.e., the four organizers of the Breda 2018 meeting) unable to coordinate all the various activities under the FoWOP umbrella. This proved to be a point where *democratization* was needed, such that members could be more centrally involved in the coordination and the future of the network, and the activities falling under the FoWOP umbrella. This led to the setup of a central coordinating committee, where members could join and be part of. The COVID-19 pandemic meant a disruption of the FoWOP activities, as many active members of the network were struggling with balancing their work duties (teaching online, publishing) with closing of schools and thus homeschooling their children, and other sudden obligations and pressures resulting from the crisis. While some online activities were organized (webinars), it meant a difficult time for the network, as the process of democratization and the sharing of responsibilities coincided with the crisis, through which the lack of established routines, responsibilities, and physical meetings became a problem in sustaining the effectiveness of the network. At the time of writing this chapter (summer 2022), another FoWOP SGM is being organized for September 2022, which is likely to kick-start another wave of activities and taskforces.

The FoWOP network was founded to elicit change in an academic system that has been dominated by a hypercompetitive culture, where people are systematically exploited and abused and being held hostage in everlasting temporary contracts with little prospect of job security, and a system which had become to prioritize meaningless research published in the top-tier journals above critical thought focused on meaningfulness and impact for a better society. Hence, as academics, we have been confronted with the rising absurdities inherent to contemporary academic

life. At the same time, there has been a strong push over the years to hypernormalize the status quo in academia, with the tendency to portray current state of affairs as entirely normal, and the way it should be organized to deliver the highest-quality research and teaching. At the same time, over the last years, there has been a rise in problematization of this state of affairs, with academics having the privilege of thought and writing about their own predicament (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Bal, 2017; Bal et al., 2019; Ball, 2012; Parker, 2018). Hence, we are observing a rise in the problematizing of the contemporary academic system. However, this has not led to systemic change (yet), and resistance has become activated. For instance, in the Netherlands, the WO In Actie (HE In Action) Movement is a collective of university employees and students in the Netherlands resisting the neoliberalization of academia (e.g., the austerity imposed on higher education funding by government). In 2019, the group organized a strike among university employees and students to protest against budget cuts to university funding. Such open resistance against current academic institutions has drawn the attention in society towards the increasingly deplorable state in which university education and research has to be delivered, and the work pressures imposed on academic staff.

The FoWOP network has engaged in written forms of resistance against hegemonic ideology, such as expressed in the Manifesto (Bal et al., 2019). While more implicit within the movement, resistance has been primarily included in the problematization of existing practices and norms, and the deliberate attempt to dissociate from such practices. An important emphasis within the network has been on the notion of imagining, or the narration of alternatives, such as expressed in the Manifesto, which discusses both short-term and long-term recommendations to create more dignified academic institutions. The actual transformation process entails the most difficult stage and is about how actual social circumstances may be changed. While action groups such as WO in Actie in the Netherlands span the entire academic field, and therefore have the human power to lobby for changes at governmental level, the much smaller network of work psychologists, such as the FoWOP network, has the ability to experiment with changes at a local level to highlight and

showcase how alternative academic systems may look like. The collective network brings together many (critical) work psychologists who have been isolated within their departments and institutions, and feeling little empowerment and agency to make changes in their own work environment. It is therefore that such networks bridge between individual action and larger-scale action. Each of these are needed to contribute to the transformation of academia towards a more dignified system, whereby the dignity of university staff and the students are prioritized, and where teaching and research output do not dominate beyond the health and well-being of those delivering it.

The transformation of academia is a large-scale and long-term process, just as it will be for many organizations and society alike. There is no binary choice needed between revolution or pragmatism (Garcia, 2021), as there is no choice between top-down and bottom-up change. Both are necessary to engage in the transformation needed towards a more sustainable society that is able to reflect upon its own destructive behavior and which is willing to engage in truly constructive solutions towards the greatest challenges that society is facing.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have referred to hypernormalization as manifesting at societal level, but often used examples from the workplace. The relevance of studying hypernormalization in the workplace in addition to social life entails an understanding of the workplace as the sphere where absurdity unfolds in extreme degrees. While publications on neoliberal ideology (Bal & Dóci, 2018) have argued that societies experience a ‘commodification of everything,’ it is the workplace in a broad meaning of social settings where work takes place, where absurdities are particularly prone to manifest. The rise of bureaucracy and neoliberal ideology in defining the structure of contemporary workplace have been given attention through writings on stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018), and nonsense (Tourish, 2020). Absurdities are rife in the workplace, and the four interrelated strategies of

problematizing-resisting-imagining-transforming may provide ways in both organizations and society more broadly to address absurdities and hypernormalization and find more dignified and resilience-based solutions to these problems.

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10

Moving Forward with Absurdity

Introduction

This book explored the meanings and manifestations of absurd social practice in society and in workplaces. Starting from the observations of absurdity manifesting across many levels in global society including individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels, this book theorized upon the notion of how and why absurdity manifests, what this absurdity consists of, and how such absurdity remains concealed and hypernormalized over time. Throughout the book, we have introduced a variety of ways to think about absurd social practice, including the tragic and dangerous nature of absurdity—the notion that absurdity is never ‘innocent’ and inherently carries an explosive potential that makes its hypernormalization not a surprising factor given its de-stabilizing potential. While absurdity has always been part of human existence, we can currently observe a more far-reaching type of absurdity and deliberate attempt to hypernormalize the status quo at the expense of absurdity explosion itself: similar to the Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2003, 2005), the absurdities which may have been long concealed are no longer merely ‘hypernormalized,’ as they increasingly surface within public discourse

and mainstream media. Hence, on the one hand, it seems as if hypernormalization becomes less operative in concealing absurdity in society and in workplaces. In reference to the 'ultimate absurdity' (i.e., the destruction of the planet for economic profit), it is now widely known across the world that exploitation remains the basis for the organizing of economies and thus of societies. Such exploitation fills news reports and discourse at a daily level, and therefore, absurdities present themselves 'right in our face.' On the other hand, hypernormalization remains effective and is perhaps even more strongly present in portraying the need for change, so that all can remain the same. In this sense, hypernormalization is all but an absurd process in itself: as hypernormalization can be orchestrated by powerful actors in society (e.g., governments, business, ideologically driven think tanks), it often serves a conservative and neoliberal agenda that perpetuates the neo-colonial capitalist status quo, benefitting the rich in society (Brown, 2019). Absurdity, therefore, is something that can be 'rationally' managed by powerful actors in society: while Soviet Union rulers made the deliberate choice to 'freeze' discourse after the death of Stalin, creating absurdity while benefitting personally, in contemporary society we observe the rational hypernormalization of absurdity by multinational corporations, governments, and other actors in society.

This shows the complex nature of the relationship between the absurd and its normalization: even when the absurd experience may become more commonly shared among people, it is far from evident that hypernormalization is no longer functional. In contrast, it is in these moments when absurdity reaches the surface of awareness and recognition that hypernormalization becomes effective in its inherent appeal to deny absurdity to exist, and to cling on instead to a fantasy of normality, or simply because it is too traumatic to face the absurdities surrounding us. However, in the unreadiness of the individual or collective to face absurdity, we are not merely observing a situation of 'abnormality,' a deviation from the norm guiding social life. Instead, the mirror reflection of absurdity is seen in the void of the hypernormal: this hypernormal is by definition posited as the value-free, objective, and neutral reality that humankind lives under. These are the contours of society which are imposed upon the very mind of the individual, both through deliberate shaping of public discourse by elites and those in power, and more

spontaneously emerging norms. In its projected neutrality, the hypernormalized state functions as a protection layer against any deviation, be it the need for radical change within (global) society towards greater equality, supporting the struggle against racism, corporate impunity, and climate inertia. As hypernormalization accentuates the impossibility of an alternative, ideological and fantasmatic investment into the status quo is only strengthened, and alike, neoliberal capitalism dominates the conceptual space to such extent that alternatives simply cannot be imagined, and every solution to societal problems have to be imagined *within* the constraints of the current system (e.g., that the laws are simply made to prioritize free trade and business interests beyond human and planetary rights).

Experiences of hypernormalization across domains cause a strengthening of the status quo, which over time may only contribute to even greater absurdities to manifest. For instance, the ‘freezing’ of authoritative discourse after Stalin’s death in order to sustain control over the vast Soviet empire led to a ‘hypernormalization of language’ (Yurchak, 2005). Over decades, this hypernormalized language accentuated the gap between authoritative discourse and really existing practices: this discourse was less and less able to describe reality on the ground. Therefore, it was hypernormalization itself which contributed to and being part of the process leading up to the Fall of the Wall, the end of the Communist era in the Eastern bloc. Similarly, the current forms of hypernormalization ultimately prove to be ineffective, but responses to such hypernormalization are not automatically linked to a search for dignity and equality to deconstruct the hypernormalized inequalities themselves. Given the emotional attachment to the absurd through its hypernormalization, such attachment creates a stronger bond than any rational, logical belief. Dignity is therefore not an automatic priority when faced with absurdity. How to deal, then, with such emotional investment into absurdity?

It is not surprising that a variety of expressions and conceptualization have appeared around the notion of absurdity embracement. Originally Camus (1942) pointed to the embracing of and rebellion against absurdity as the way towards getting out of absurdity, thereby positioning the ‘creative act’ as the mediator in between absurdity experience and a meaningful way out. However, such rebellion does not guarantee a turn to

dignity, and the 'embrace of absurdity' may also materialize as a retreat into further hypernormalization through disavowal. It is in this process that ideological fantasy pushes the individual into a specific direction that legitimizes either the status quo or the more extreme rupture from absurdity itself through the violence of disavowal: a retreat into fantasy may also manifest through the 'doubling-up' of absurdity. In such situation, the tragic and dangerous nature of absurdity are not fully acknowledged as a result of hypernormalization itself: when absurdity is hypernormalized, need for analysis is eliminated, as the status quo is how things *really are*. It is within the perspective of the individual or group where the doubling-up leads to violence and tragedy (Žižek, 2009). When confronted unconsciously with one's cynical disavowal, a violent rejection may occur as part of one's disavowal: it hints towards the impotence in getting closer to the absurdity itself while retaining one's libidinal investment into hypernormalization. In such cases, absurdity can be blamed on specific groups or situations, and the projected way out leads through another form of exclusion: humanity and dignity are not prioritized but one's own or one's group's ontological security above that of others. For instance, in the Netherlands, the summer of 2022 was dominated by protests of farmers against climate action from the government (Bloomberg, 2022). Again, this constituted an impossible paradox, whereby it was not simply the choice in favor of the government (finally) implementing climate policies to reduce the enormous carbon emissions produced in the intensive farming system in the Netherlands (policies which were imposed and enforced through European law). The protests culminated from decades of neoliberal government policy, deliberately aimed at economic growth of the agricultural 'industry,' aided by the financial sector and large agricultural firms profiting from the hypergrowth of the sector. The farmers themselves were both responsible for the emissions, and victims of the exploitation within the economic system that is enforced upon the agricultural sector. However, there is no binary choice between support for the farmers and support for the government, which had neglected the necessity of climate action within this sector for decades while acting *too little, too late*. Nonetheless, the increasingly violent protests from the farmers also indicated a retreat into disavowal, as the ultimate demand of the farmers seemed to be to get rid of

the climate action measures from the government. Hence, there is always the danger of a further retreat into absurdity, a hypernormalization of being strengthened over and over again.

In sum, absurdity and hypernormalization are not specific to this day and age, and have been part of human life. Perhaps the hypernormalization of absurdity also helps individuals not having to be confronted with the need to contemplate the meaninglessness of life itself, and one's existence on the planet. Therefore, hypernormalization fulfills an essential function in maintaining the status quo within society and the perpetuation of social practices considered to be 'entirely normal.' It is through these processes that we are still witnessing racial and gender inequalities, a prioritization of economic profit beyond human and planetary concern, a neo-colonialization of the 'Global South' (a term itself neo-colonially defined), a rise in populism and authoritarianism, and inertia towards climate breakdown. The theoretical lens of absurdity and hypernormalization help to elucidate the nature of such manifestations, but also the ideological underpinning of hypernormalization. Using a Žižekian ideology lens, we were able to ascertain the fantasmatic nature of and involvement in absurdity through which hypernormalization not only manifests but also remains the most 'logical' step to secure ontological security and well-being. To break through hypernormalization and to experience a moment of revelation is a daunting endeavor, and it is far from surprising to observe that such moments occur rarely and tend to be disavowed easily. Thus, we see a retreat *into* hypernormalization, a case not unsimilar from the Stockholm Syndrome, where individuals cling on the status quo even despite the counterevidence being widely available. A range of coping mechanisms may be employed in such circumstances, such as externalizing blame, felt helplessness and self-assurance that genuine action is taking place. Meanwhile, people remain within hypernormalization, and as such also remain invested into the perpetuation of the status quo. The continuation of fantasmatic investment into hypernormalization also binds people into it, into legitimizing that which is inherently absurd. This incongruence creates cognitive dissonance, as people need to psychologically manage the discrepancy between their beliefs, which are supported through ideological fantasy, and what they experience around them at a daily level. This does not lead the individual to a need to get out

of hypernormalization such that the absurd can be exposed fully, in its traumatic potential, so that only through exposure a way may be found towards a post-hypernormalized reality. Exposure to its tragic nature may be the first step towards the articulation of an alternative framework to structure organizations and society, whereby the absurd is embraced rather than hypernormalized. This book aimed to start understanding such processes and, importantly, also a way out of hypernormalization. We will now follow with a more personal reflection on the writing of the book and our research on absurdity and hypernormalization.

Personal Reflections on the Writing of the Book

Writing a book on absurdity and hypernormalization proved to be a challenging endeavor, one that required creativity and reflection as authors. Absurdity as a scientific concept has been more or less absent from discussions in the management, psychology, and sociology literature. This was surprising to the authors, as the basis of absurdity within philosophy and literature would give ‘enough’ insights to be able to use the concept more broadly to understand contemporary phenomena in the world and in workplaces. However, the original project did not start with investigation of the absurd nature of contemporary society, but with the ‘discovery’ of the work of Yurchak (2003, 2005) on the late decades of the Soviet Union (see also Curtis, 2016). Inspired by the collective memory of the image of the ‘meaningless’ propaganda that fills the media in authoritarian regimes, Yurchak investigated the meanings and emergence of such propaganda, thereby providing in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of propaganda in dictatorial regimes, and thus explaining the visible gap between ‘meaningless’ authoritative discourse and really existing practices in society, which could be entirely opposed to discourse. How to understand concepts such as ‘brotherhood’ and ‘solidarity,’ both belonging to the domain of public discourse, when at the same time, people could be randomly arrested by the police or secret service, prosecuted for something that they had not done, and sentenced to absurd terms in prison?

Yurchak's anthropological research showed that the binary split between public enunciation and really existing practices (and people's private disengagement from discourse) was too simplistic and that people were often pragmatic translators of public discourse to meaningful practices in their own communities. This all contributed to the *de*-legitimization of the Soviet state, but it took more than four decades after Stalin's death to ultimately cause the Fall of the Wall and consequently, the fall of the Soviet empire. Having become familiarized with the notion of hypernormalization of language as a strategy by the Soviet rulers to enforce stability over the Soviet empire, the authors of this book started to reflect on the meaning of hypernormalization in more contemporary contexts. For instance, in the context of climate change, governments and industries that continue to emit carbon into the air and actively lobby against climate action are continuously engaged in the creation of authoritative discourse, through both official government campaigns and (in-)action and through PR and advertising. Such propaganda also becomes hypernormalized, as the actual content and meaning of such discourse is fundamentally dissociated—we are witnessing a hypernormalization that is not unlike the very dynamics within the Soviet Union. To be able to explain why such opposed systems (i.e., authoritarian Communism vs. neoliberal democracy) experience the same dynamics, we turned to an understanding of hypernormalization as driving an ideological agenda (Žižek, 1989). This 'agenda' is not purely designed and driven by elites, but can also emerge spontaneously as the fantasies that jointly constitute ideology. The hypernormalization present in the Soviet Union always carried an implicit message of the absurd, something not touched upon by Yurchak himself (2003, 2005). The inability of propaganda and media in general to form a relationship with really existing Communism meant an everlasting absurdity that was right there to see for the 'naïve' bystander. This is also prominent in the television series Chernobyl about the 1986 nuclear disaster. Confronted by the nuclear meltdown, the power plant management and government leaders manifest their inability to articulate a relationship between actual practice (the nuclear meltdown), and a discourse which was unable to account for such disasters, as it would underpin the decay of the Soviet Union. Absurdity is how the situation can most accurately be described, as if the

leaders involved simply miss the vocabulary to express what is actually going on.

A similar inability or impotence of leadership can be found in the contemporary West. While jointly drinking a coffee or tea, the authors regularly met at the business school building in Lincoln during the years 2016–2019 and discussed the meaning of hypernormalization in the contemporary era. The business school building was, ironically enough, under permanent fluctuation and restructuring and reorganizing, through which many staff had to change offices annually due to the continuously reorganized structure of the school. One attempt to mitigate against the impact of such regular upheaval was the creation of a shared space with a kitchen and some lounges. Part of this small area was an installed television screen which continuously broadcasted BBC News. Hence, while discussing the concept of hypernormalization of a neoliberal order in contemporary society (and infiltrating universities, research and teaching; Parker, 2018), we were continuously confronted with the absurdities emerging in the world news, and most prominently the rise of Donald Trump as the President of the USA and the Brexit referendum which had opened a split within British society and which amplified the rise of Boris Johnson as a political figure. It was striking how media in the USA hyper-normalized Trump as just another president, and even would call him ‘presidential’ when by accident or deliberate strategy, he would act and behave how previous presidents would. Such rare ‘presidential’ behavior only signified the complete absence of logic behind his presidency beyond serving his own interest to the bitter end: ultimately this situation was merely absurd, and reason and logic (e.g., ‘logical’ explanation of how right-wing authoritarian populism emerges as the other side of the coin of neoliberalism, and therefore constituting a logical consequence of decades of neoliberal austerity) dissolved in the absurdity of the entire situation. We were not just witnessing a retreat into right-wing exclusionary politics (e.g., ‘take back control’ or ‘drain the Washington swamp’), but that of the dissolution of reason altogether into a situation that was no longer under the control of the liberal elites, exposing an absurd situation where the vulgarity of President Trump connected with the Christian Evangelicals and raw capitalist power (Brown, 2019) to produce a contemporary form of government that had not seen before.

It was in this context that our discussions on hypernormalization took place, and it was not surprising that a need to delve deeper into the conceptualization of absurdity came across as an important aspect of the book. Hence, in our discussions and intellectual development, it was not that absurdity preceded hypernormalization, but vice versa, with the observations of hypernormalized practices that led us to experience *estrangement* (Pfaller, 2012). While the separation between discourse and actual practice was more and more directly visible, another layer was added with the inappropriateness of the current forms of government and acceptable discourse. It was often referred to how the previous US President Obama's attitude had to be 'contained,' as the only way through which his presidency as a Black man would be 'tolerated' by the White majority was when Obama played the role perfectly, fitting within the prescribed expectations of the liberal White elites (e.g., Obama could not publicly show anger, as the White liberal majority would not 'tolerate' an 'angry Black man' to be their president). Trump became the absurd counterpart to Obama, the inverse of all honorable dignity of Obama, violating any implicit rule of the decent and dignified president, exposing thereby the emptiness of the position itself through the most vulgar way possible (and also highlighting that ultimately economic policy of Obama and Trump were conspicuously close to each other). Nonetheless, beyond any discussion of how Trump had been able to rise to the presidency, and how the context of a post-Obama White supremacist retreat paved the way for a resentment vote for Trump, it was a situation of absurdity. It was the era in which the discrepancies *within* neoliberal capitalism became so overwhelming that it could most accurately be described as absurd.

Framing such events and dynamics as absurd enabled us to capture them within a larger conceptual-theoretical space of hypernormalization, which helped us towards two main goals. On the one hand, it contributed to an understanding of the common features and dynamics underpinning the great challenges of our time: whether it is climate inertia, neoliberalism, bureaucracy, racism, or inequality, framing these global problems as absurd helps to understand the underlying dynamics that maintain these practices within society while observing the similarities through the study of the ideology underpinning these practices. On the other hand, it also helped to distance oneself from the mundane

vulgaritys bombarding the individual in contemporary society. When watching the news, reading the newspapers and news websites, one cannot help but being profoundly emotionally touched by the tragedies resulting from these absurdities: climate change destroying people's living habitats, ongoing wars in various places across the world destroying lives and futures, and neoliberal capitalism perpetuating exploitation of people and the planet worldwide while prioritizing economic profit beyond everything. The analysis of these observations as absurdities which are hypernormalized helps to understand our contemporary predicament beyond individual cases. It also helps to understand that there is no solution through addressing one or more absurdities individually: after all, Trump was only a symptom, and with his removal, nothing is solved, and absurdity merely exposes itself in another form (e.g., by showing the impotence of the president Biden to block the Supreme Court's decision to overrule *Roe vs. Wade* and re-introduce bans on abortion throughout the USA).

Absurdities are often merely symptoms of the broken system, which are nonetheless of a dangerous and explosive potential, which causes the elites and rulers to continuously normalize these absurdities as inherently part of society and that what should be considered taken for granted and the norm. Therefore, absurdity is never 'innocent,' as behind absurdity an order is concealed that structures society and workplaces. Hypernormalization of such order functions as the way the status quo could be perpetuated, which makes effective resistance against hypernormalization so difficult. Too often, we are confronted with the symptoms of a broken system, and response is generated at the level of symptoms rather than underlying structures enabling them, as these structures are hypernormalized or obscured. For instance, fake news and conspiracy theories cannot be merely 'factchecked,' or discredited through a belief in a rational, truth-based opposite. The notion that there is a single truth that could be scientifically ascertained remains in the same very fantastic basis as a belief in fake news does. Therefore, we need a process of real estrangement, a process and realization among individuals and groups in society of the strangeness of the system that we have constructed, and the way it systematically strips people and the planet of their dignity (Bal, 2017). While Camus (1942) referred to the absurd

moment as an individual experience, perhaps it is time for a more collective conceptualization of the absurd moment. In this collective absurd moment, it may be possible and necessary to expose absurdities in a wider sense, such that the feeling of estrangement may not necessarily be equated to anxiety and ontological insecurity. In contrast, collective estrangement may help to provide ontological security when there is an opportunity for the sharing of these experiences of estrangement.

However, what will follow estrangement? Žižek (2009) argues for a *parallax view* (cf. Kilroy, 2019), which would consist of a radical third way. For instance, in the dichotomy fake news-factchecking, the latter offers no real escape and proper response to the former, as we are confronted with the clash of two logics: the liberal, reason-based logic of liberal democracy (factchecking) versus the dissolution of logic itself (fake news). There is no choice to be made here between either of the two options. Instead, a radical alternative is needed in which the fantasmatic nature of both ‘logics’ is exposed—both are grounded in a fantasy that leads to overinvestment of the individual into hypernormalizing a view of the status quo or that of a fantasy of a radical overturn of the established order (i.e., fake news) to sustain an inherently fantasmatic perception of a reality that will never be there, and which can only be based on the struggle and exclusion of particular groups within society. Instead, to follow a parallax view is to witness the absurdity of the impossible paradox, and the necessity for a radical alternative, a third way out which is founded on a radically different principle.

In an earlier book, one of the authors introduced a theory of workplace dignity (Bal, 2017), which may be an example of such ‘radical alternative’ (see also Bal & Brookes, 2022). In other words, absurdity may not be counteracted through exposing its falseness while presenting the reason-based opposite as alternative, but through the postulating of new paradigms that may guide theory and action. In this case, dignity offers an alternative anchoring point (*point de capiton*; Žižek, 1989) for the understanding of concepts belonging to the domain of authoritative discourse. Hence, a concept such as sustainability (Bal & Brookes, 2022; Bal et al., 2021) may obtain new meanings when anchored within a dignity framework. In so doing, sustainability efforts only lead to greater sustainability when aimed at respecting, protecting, and promoting dignity of people

and the planet. This way, dignity offers a way out of the empty authoritative discourse around sustainability through postulating the question of the effects of sustainability initiatives and action towards the dignity of people and the planet. Uncovering the absurdity of contemporary unsustainable social systems and practices is harder to accommodate within the present-day hypernormalized reality. A normative, sustainable future, a rhetorical imaginary better future world can and has been accommodated quite successfully within the still dominant hypernormalized reality, which therefore continues to obscure the present-day absurdity. An awareness of hypernormalized reality behind sustainability and extent to which it constrains and shapes our subjectivities and logics is perhaps the first step to addressing societies' most pressing issues. For example, the language and concepts used to explore sustainability can then be deliberately drawn from *outside* the bounded hypernormalized reality. This will enable the creation of new paradigms and hasten the end of the current, and perhaps crumbling, neoliberal era. While exposing the emptiness of authoritative discourse on sustainability, infusing the term towards a notion of dignified sustainability gives rise to interpretations that have intrinsic meaning for both people and the environment. For instance, Bal et al. (2021) posited how sustainability anchored within dignity is related to greater meaningfulness and actual concern for future generations. Hence, it is not so much a case of getting rid of concepts such as sustainability, which have been polluted through infusion by neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2016), but to 'rescue' such concepts, and anchor them in much more radical interpretations.

In the case of inequality, we also have to ascertain that it cannot be merely freely used by institutions such as the World Economic Forum (2019). Inequality is not merely an externality of societal and economic progress, a 'naturally' occurring mechanism of free-market capitalism (Stiglitz, 2012). Inequality is the very outcome of the economic structuring under neoliberal capitalism (Harvey, 2005). It is not only a byproduct of capitalism but the very mechanism through which corporate profit is generated. While inequality is about the struggle of the poor against their exploitation, it cannot be a matter of raising the poor out of their poverty while retaining the status quo among those on the higher ends. It has to be acknowledged first that inequality results from the exploitation of the

poorest by the wealthiest in society, who have obtained their wealth through exploitation itself. Inequality, therefore, is even more a matter of assessing how wealth is being generated than only focusing on those suffering in society. As long as wealth generation mechanisms remain intact, there is no real choice between the binary distinction of hypernormalizing inequality as a natural dynamic in capitalism, or as something that can be simply fixed through progressive income taxation. It is therefore a choice of articulating a radical third alternative and finding ways to social constellations that prioritize dignity over hypernormalization.

Cautionary Notes and Future Thought and Research

We have largely used the examples of Western societies, but we note the globalization of absurdity and hypernormalization. This is conveyed through the export of ideologies and political narratives, international trade regulations, and military powers that sit within dominant imperialist regimes (Fabbrini, 2010; Robert et al., 2014). Hypernormalized realities are filling the Western world at a fast pace. Thus, the influence the West has through its dominance in the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and IMF) as well as supranational organizations such as the United Nations constrains the less powerful nations into espousing absurd rules and policies that defy their own cultural and ‘normal’ foundations. In addition to the practical strategies that we have advocated to come out of hypernormalization and absurdity, it may also not be unthinkable that a global sociopolitical revolution could happen through the awakening of popular consciousness. This could ineluctably lead to a global reset of mores, the outcome of which is to arrive back at sensibleness and normalized humanity. This is perhaps the process that Albert Camus (1942) advocated several decades back when he argued that the absurdity of human existence should be acknowledged in view to embark on a meaningful journey of human value creation and sense-making. The emergence of a strong counter-narrative from the remnants of resistance from an increasingly assertive the Global South could also be a way to

re(establish) a dialectical discourse that could contribute to restore our normal selves. Nonetheless, the theory developed in this book of how absurdity and hypernormalization unfold have general implications for research in the area of social sciences, management, psychology, and organization studies. We will finish the book with these general observations and possibilities of an absurdity and hypernormalization lens.

Ontology and Epistemology

The problematic phenomenon that we have been exploring in this book is absurdity. Absurdity describes actually existing conditions, behaviors, practices, social systems, and institutions that are harmful and destructive or at the very least pointless. Yet human beings continue to engage in and sustain these absurdities despite their negative impacts. Hypernormalization is an abstract concept that provides a means of developing an understanding of this phenomenon of absurdity. Hypernormalization describes the psychological and social processes that generate and sustain absurdity. It is an observable phenomenon that humans continue to willfully act against their own interests causing self-destruction and self-harm, for instance, continuing to use fossil fuels and consume natural resources at a rate that will lead to the extinction of our species.

Obscured Absurdities

Absurdity persists because the situations, practices, systems are not widely perceived as being absurd. Absurdities are obscured because the reality that produces these absurdities and the absurdities themselves have become hypernormalized. Human subjectivity has been shaped, through social processes and institutions, to see these absurdities as normal, the way things are, the only way they could be. Hypernormalization describes the process by which human subjectivity is shaped in a way that sees the absurd as benign and normal, or at least unalterable. How can we act, or be motivated to act, if we simply cannot ‘see’ the absurdity? This obscuring of the absurd, this shaping of subjectivity occurs across different

contexts and manifests itself in different ways. Yurchak describes how late Soviet-era society was controlled through a deliberate political project of hypernormalization. This was a hypernormalized society, yet it was still not universal in the sense that Soviet citizens were aware of alternative societies. In this book we have argued that many of the contemporary absurdities, ‘global absurdities,’ are generated and sustained by more universal hypernormalizing processes, such as neoliberalism, consumerism, racism, bureaucracy, and so on. These processes are not coordinated, deliberate projects (as was the case in the late Soviet era and is the case in contemporary North Korea), but hypernormalization is a consequence of systemic absurdities, inequalities, injustices, malfeasance within our contemporary social systems.

Developmental Psychology of the Absurd and Hypernormalization

Susceptibility to hypernormalizing processes is part of our evolved human nature. For the first few years of our childhood, we in effect live in a hypernormalized world that is constructed by our parents or carers. We absorb this version of reality as the world as it is. It enables us to construct a sense of ourselves and our relationship to the world around us. It is essential for our survival and flourishing. So we have the capacity for absorbing totalizing realities as these satisfy a psychosocial need for making sense and security. Human learning through childhood and into adulthood is about engaging with realities beyond our first experience and adjusting our mental models so that we can still make sense of our concrete experiences in the lifeworld. Each individual will have different capacity and capability for critically reflecting on and adjusting their mental model of reality in the light of new experiences. This is a false polarity between uncritical children and critical adults because humans throughout their life still guide their actions through realities that have been adopted without critique. It is highly unsettling to question the certainties that help us navigate through life; it creates fear and uncertainty when our ontological security is threatened. We perceive it as destabilizing, a threat to our identity, our fundamental security, and

well-being. Hypernormalizing processes satisfy basic human psychological needs and the powerful emotions that are associated with these.

We have a complex relationship with the absurd. It forms the basis of the human cultural phenomenon of humor. We are attracted to absurd situations; we take pleasure in them. This perhaps is again a psychological coping mechanism for dealing with uncertainty. At this everyday level absurdity is approached at very superficial level, while the important life-threatening absurdities remain largely obscured.

Universal Reality

Hypernormalizing processes, both deliberate (e.g., propaganda) and systemic/emergent (e.g. neoliberalism, patriarchy, Western modernity, etc.), create powerful, compelling, and sustained realities that are all encompassing and universal. They hypernormalize in the sense that they totally dominate the conceptual space, as in the totality of individual subjectivities, thereby providing the only reality—the normal and natural state. The societal processes, power structures, and institutions that produce this hypernormalized reality are themselves deeply embedded and normalized (e.g., consumerism, hierarchy, etc.). They provide such an all-encompassing reality that it creates the illusion that there is no other conceptual space from which to critique, that there is no external viewpoint. Critique does take place but it is still within the bounds of the universal, hypernormalized reality rather than being radical, separate or from a critical distance. Within this totalizing reality then, where no critical distance is afforded, absurdity can continue exist in plain sight.

There is a relationship between hypernormalization and the concepts of paradigms of knowledge and understanding. Historically long periods of hypernormalization have existed where a universal, stable view of reality shaped human thinking and behavior. In Western Europe until the Enlightenment, the hypernormalized reality was shaped by an almost universal belief in Christianity and the existence of a supernatural omnipotent god. There was no conceptual space to critique this understanding of reality; people were simply unable to imagine an alternative atheistic reality. Once people became aware of the possibility of alternative

realities, then a paradigm shift started to take place. The processes that sustained this hypernormalized Christian reality were not natural or autonomous—they were actively constructed and reconstructed through discourse, liturgy, and powerful symbols (e.g., cathedrals). In contemporary society the hypernormalized reality of capitalism is sustained in a similar way with discourse and symbols (e.g., the ‘temples’ of capitalism—skyscrapers, the stock exchange, super yachts, etc.). In the case of capitalism we still await the paradigm shift or enlightenment to an *anti-capitalist* world.

Hypernormalization as a Political Process

Hypernormalization is also a political act or process that serves the interests of those that benefit from the absurdity of the status quo. This is especially where the harm that is created by absurdity is inflicted in an equal way, with those in power suffering little from the absurdity and the majority, the less powerful suffering the most. This is the case in climate change where the absurdity of continued fossil-fuel consumption primarily affects the poorest and less powerful, for example, in the Global South. Hypernormalization is political because it serves the particular interests of powerful and wealthy. The processes that create and sustain hypernormalized realities are controlled by the powerful and wealthy. In contemporary society powerful actors deliberately engage in hypernormalizing processes, such as through state propaganda, corporate marketing, and public relations.

Hypernormalization and Western Modernity

Western modernity/colonialism was itself an act, or project, of hypernormalization. The myth of Western rationality as the universal and only form of knowledge was held in place by brutal and violent colonial domination and the destruction of alternative knowledge and cultures—through genocide and epistemicide. Decoloniality and anticoloniality provide the alternative conceptual space that has enabled the critique and

dismantling of the hypernormalized reality of universal Western rationality. Hypernormalization is therefore a useful conceptual lens to make sense of changing historical eras. Historical eras are stable periods where a hypernormalized reality dominates thinking and becomes the apparent natural state. A wider historical perspective shows that powerful societal actors can only sustain these hypernormalized realities for so long before they break down, the absurdities emerge from obscurity and new realities, sense-making rationalities have to be created to restore equilibrium. Neoliberalism and globalization are the present-day hypernormalized reality, yet these are only a historical era that will come to an end, or are perhaps as John Ralston Saul argues already coming to an end, as the absurdities become so apparent that they can no longer be contained within the hypernormalized version of reality.

Bureaucracy and Absurdity

Hypernormalization sustains and perpetuates absurdity—it presents the absurd as meaningful and of value. The bureaucracy of contemporary work organizations is a prime example of the absurd. Time and energy are exerted in enacting bureaucratic processes that are a widely recognized, but not acknowledged, as pointless. These processes often make no material difference, are a waste of time and yet we still carry on enacting them, we still follow the rules however absurd they might be. The managerialist rhetoric and discourse of efficiency and control to some extent create a hypernormalized reality that obscures the worthlessness of many actually existing bureaucratic processes. The social systems and structures constrain the extent to which bureaucratic processes are resisted. Social control through fear limits the extent to which people in organizations will actively resist the bureaucratic absurdities. Fear of loss of livelihood, loss of reputation, career opportunities, and so on mean that we all make individual political choices about how much we resist or conform to the processes of hypernormalization. After all, absurdity is hypernormalized because we allow it to be so. Reversal of hypernormalization, unleashing the absurd, and embracing it may provide new ways for humanity to articulate and contribute to more dignified and resilient societies, workplaces, and communities.

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