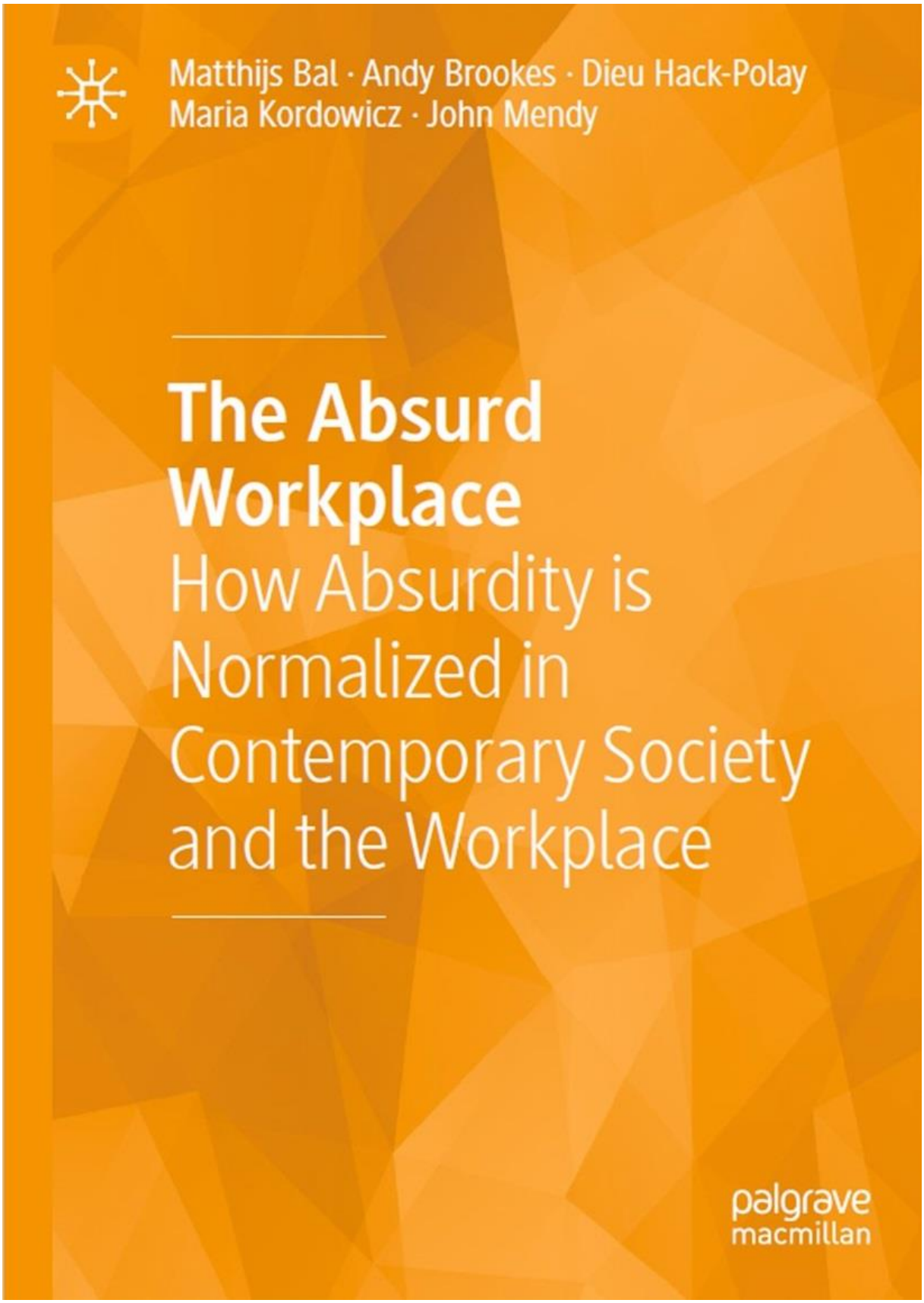
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The Absurd Workplace
How Absurdity is Normalized in Contemporary Society and the Workplace
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Chapter 1: Introduction to Absurdity and Hypernormalization in Contemporary Society and Workplaces

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This chapter introduces the book, and discusses the main background, literature and theories that the authors draw upon. It highlights the various domains in contemporary life, in society and workplaces that can be described as absurd. Moreover, the chapter lays out the case for the need to write about absurdity and understand how absurdities are normalized, perpetuated and not effectively contested. It introduces the main theoretical foundations which will be used throughout the book, including existentialist philosophy to understand the absurd, and Yurchak's anthropological discourse analysis of hypernormalization in the late Soviet Union. Yurchak's groundbreaking work on hypernormalization will be discussed in detail as it serves as the major foundation of the book.

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 8 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, whilst 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 €7,000 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 pertain to absurdities in the Western world, and especially within the UK, the US 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 are 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 US, 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 as the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized, and for which ideology offers an escape. In Chapter 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 type 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 precising 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 vs. 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 whilst 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 both bringing absurdity to the fore (thereby unmasking absurd social practices), but 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 neoliberal 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 indicate 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 play 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 chapters (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, 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 are profound, and will be particularly discussed in Chapter 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 Yurchaks' (2005) work is enormously important to our conceptualization of hypernormalization, as it was his anthropological study of 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 poses 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 chapters 4-8 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 discuss how absurdities manifest in these contexts, how they are maintained, and how they could be addressed. In summarizing and learning from these case studies, Chapter 9 discusses possible ways out of absurdity and hypernormalization, and presents a framework based on four stages, including problematizing, resisting, imaginating, 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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