



Matthijs Bal · Andy Brookes · Dieu Hack-Polay  
Maria Kordowicz · John Mendy

---

# The Absurd Workplace

How Absurdity is  
Normalized in  
Contemporary Society  
and the Workplace

---

palgrave  
macmillan

## Chapter 10: Moving Forward with Absurdity

**Published in:** Bal, M., Brookes, A., Hack-Polay, D., Kordowicz, M., & Mendy, J. (2022). *The Absurd Workplace: How Absurdity is Normalized in Contemporary Society and the Workplace*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature (Chapter 10, 235-254).

**Matthijs Bal, Andy Brookes, Dieu Hack-Polay, Maria Kordowicz, & John Mendy**

The final chapter brings the chapters together and discusses the red threads and lessons learned from the various chapters and case studies. In particular, it summarizes the observations and findings from the various empirical contributions in the book, and synthesizes these contributions into new understandings of absurdity, the abnormal, and its normalization. The chapter also engages with the personal reflections of the authors writing the book and developing the ideas presented in the book. It discusses ways forward, including research that can be conducted in the future on the basis of the book, as well as more practical interventions and work that can be designed on the basis of the theorizing and analysis of absurdity and hypernormalization.

### 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 causes 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 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 or 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 powerplant 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 US 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 US hypernormalized 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 rightwing 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 rightwing 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 vulgarities 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 US).

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 fantasmatic 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 the respecting, protection and promotion of 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 been 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. As well as 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, behaviours, 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 etc. 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 a 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 wellbeing. 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) or systemic/emergent (e.g. neoliberalism, patriarchy, western modernity etc.) create a 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 etc. 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.

## References

- Bal, M. (2017). *Dignity in the workplace: New theoretical perspectives*. Amsterdam: Springer.
- Bal, M., & Brookes, A. (2022). How Sustainable Is Human Resource Management Really? An Argument for Radical Sustainability. *Sustainability*, 14(7), 4219.
- Bal, P. M., Matthews, L., Dóci, E., & McCarthy, L. P. (2021). An ideological analysis of sustainable careers: Identifying the role of fantasy and a way forward. *Career Development International*, 26(1), 83-101.
- Bloomberg (2022). *Dutch Farmers Bring Cows to Parliament to Protest Nitrogen Cuts*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-28/dutch-farmers-bring-cows-to-parliament-to-protest-nitrogen-cuts>. Website Accessed 5 July 2022.
- Brown, T. (2016). Sustainability as empty signifier: Its rise, fall, and radical potential. *Antipode*, 48(1), 115-133.
- Brown, W. (2019). *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*. Columbia University Press.
- Camus, A. (1942). *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Curtis, A. (2016). *HyperNormalisation*. UK: BBC.
- Fabbrini, S. (2010). After Globalization: Western Power in a Post-Western World. *Global Policy*, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/articles/global-governance/after-globalization-western-power-post-western-world>
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Parker, M. (2018). *Shut down the business school: What's wrong with management education*. London: Pluto Press.
- Pfaller, R. (2012). Interpassivity and misdemeanors. The analysis of ideology and the Žizekian toolbox. *Revue internationale de philosophie*, (3), 421-438.
- Robert, E., Hajizadeh, M., El-Bialy, R., & Bidisha, S. H. (2014). Globalization and the diffusion of ideas: why we should acknowledge the roots of mainstream ideas in global health. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 3(1), 7-9.
- Stiglitz, J. E. (2012). *The price of inequality: How today's divided society endangers our future*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- World Economic Forum (2019). *Agenda in Focus: Fixing Inequality*. <https://www.weforum.org/focus/fixing-inequality>. Website accessed 28 February 2022.
- Yurchak, A. (2003). Soviet hegemony of form: Everything was forever, until it was no more. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45(3), 480-510.
- Yurchak, A. (2005). *Everything was Forever, Until it was no More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, US: Princeton University Press.
- Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso Books.
- Žižek, S. (2009). *The Parallax View*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.