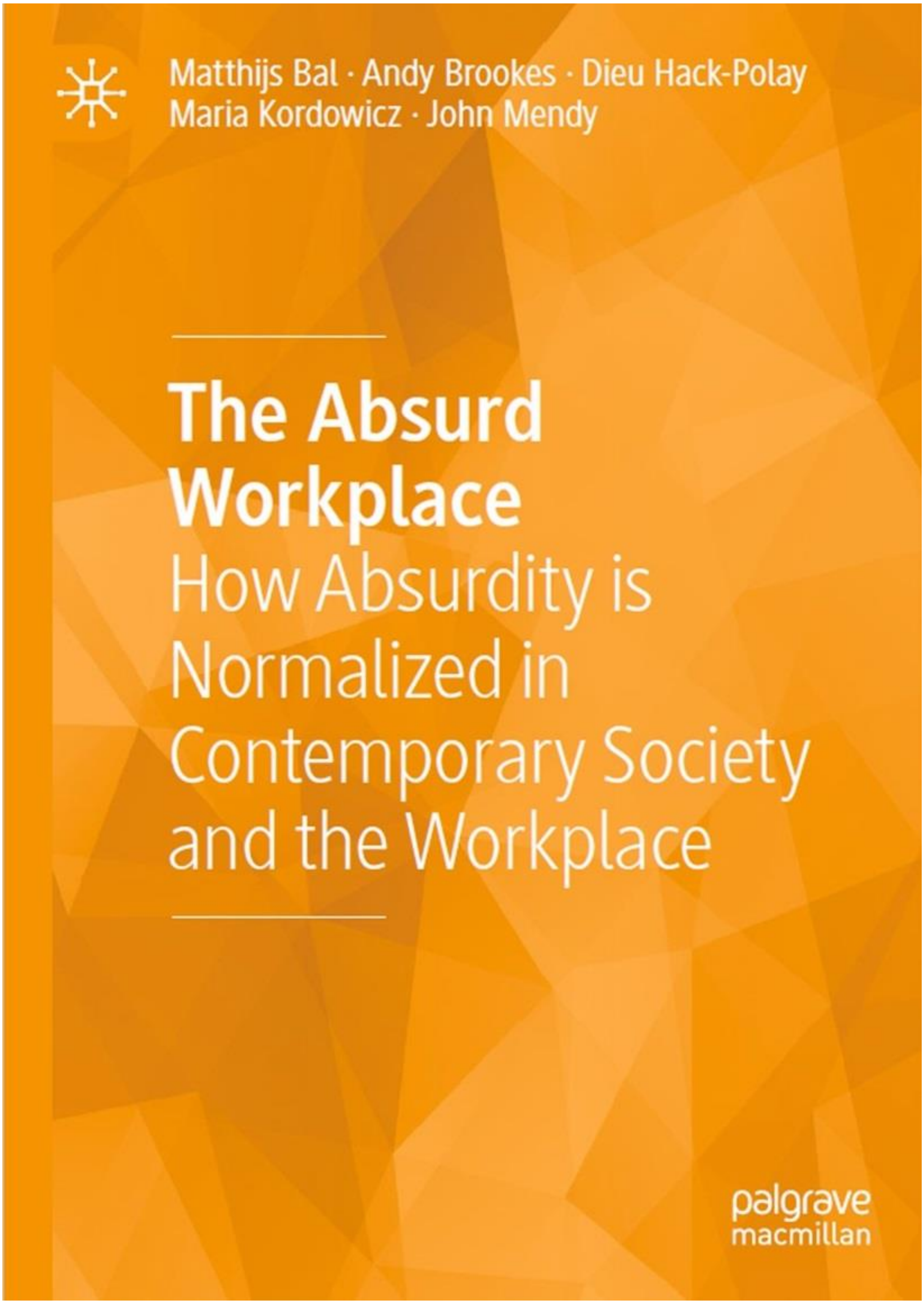
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The Absurd Workplace
How Absurdity is Normalized in Contemporary Society and the Workplace
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Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundation: a Multidisciplinary Review of Absurdity and Hypernormalization

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This chapter discusses the theoretical foundations of absurdity in contemporary society and workplaces. Absurdity arises from the absence of rationality, where observed practices paradoxically veer away from official discourse and institutional rhetoric. We discuss the definitions, dimensions and foundations of absurdity, and integrate it into an understanding of absurdity in relation to the normal, abnormal, and hypernormal. By discussing what absurdity is not, we also highlight how it is related to neighboring concepts. Moreover, absurdity does not exist in a vacuum but is penetrated by and hypernormalized through internalized societal ideologies. Hypernormalization, or the normalization of absurdity, was originally coined by Russian-born anthropologist Yurchak (2003, 2005) to understand the split between ideological discourse and practice in the last decades of the Soviet Union. We extend the understanding of hypernormalization to describe how contemporary absurdities are normalized. Moreover, we explain how hypernormalization unfolds at collective, societal or organizational, level.

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we introduced the topic of the book, and demonstrated how we are not merely living in absurd times as denoted by the great absurdity of the destruction of our planet for economic profit, but that life itself can be regarded as 'absurd' in Camusian terms – while meaningless in the inevitability of death, the absurdity of life manifests itself through our pretension of meaning in our activities, a predicament which, according to Camus, can be escaped through embracing absurdity and engaging in creative acts. While the previous chapter bridges the understanding of absurdity as a social phenomenon (i.e., the absurdity of destruction of our planet for economic profit constitutes a global 'enterprise') with absurdity as an individually-experienced phenomenon (i.e., Camusian absurdity of life itself in its experienced meaninglessness), this chapter will further bring the social and individual together in the exploration of absurdity in social practice. We will focus on the maintenance of absurdity through its normalization into the taken-for-granted assumptions in society, which may be addressed (e.g., it is striking how inequality is widely addressed as a problematic feature of contemporary society), but never adequately enough to properly change social circumstances (inequalities remain on the rise; Oxfam Novib, 2022). In this chapter, we will therefore further unpack the meanings and manifestations of absurdity, as well as introducing the concept of hypernormalization to understand how absurdity is normalized and maintained as a social phenomenon whose meaningfulness or meaninglessness may be experienced individually.

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

Absurdity

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

First, and in line with the dictionary definition, absurdity denotes something that is considered in contrast to logic and reason, *alongside its feature of inappropriateness*. Absurdity assumes the coexistence of multiple logics which jointly form an impossible paradox, leading to a result that can no longer be explained rationally. For instance, to quote a Kafkaesque example, bureaucracy is implemented in organizations to achieve fairness and consistency in organizational practices, a logic which comes to contradict the logic of professional or human autonomy or celebrating individual differences in diversity. The result may become absurd when individuals are no longer able to fulfill their job roles consistently and with fairness and may sometimes be victims of the same bureaucratic system that was purportedly designed to promote workplace effectiveness and greater efficiency. It is a case of contradicting logics, each of its own reasonable, but jointly creating absurdity in its irrationality and lack of adaptability. The impossible paradox is present in this example through the mutual dependence of both logics on each other: while bureaucracy aims to provide consistency and fairness (and thus the right for individuals to be treated as equals), professional autonomy relies on the inherent dignity of the individual, and the possibility for individuals to enact upon one's agency (Rosen, 2012). However, it is not merely a case of the inherent attractiveness of the latter option that should prevail, where a rather naïve preference for the professional autonomy beyond all else is expected to solve the limitations of bureaucracy. However, as the 'truly' anarchic organization shows, a domination of bureaucracy unfolds in relying entirely upon professional autonomy and participation, as principles of voice (i.e., for each member the possibility to express one's voice in relation to organizational practices) become absurd in an overly bureaucratized translation of deliberate democracy into hours of meetings where every individual should have the possibility to express oneself, and in so doing, stifle decision making processes in favor of individual expression (see e.g., Graeber, 2013). Thus, bureaucracy carries an inherent absurdity as it proliferates the very problems it intends to solve.

In other words, if each individual is to be respected in their autonomy, a fair and consistent process is needed to ensure so. Another option, whereby individuals purely rely upon their own professional autonomy to make decisions is also an impossible choice, as organizations are, by definition, spaces of and for collaboration. However, moving beyond the usual bureaucracy-autonomy paradox, which is a feature of modern organizations, as Kafka also showed a century ago, absurdity resides in the impossibility of the space in which a productive resolution can be found. Hence, the tragic nature of the impossible paradox stays perpetually close to the paradox itself, as shown by the real damage done within the space of the absurd paradox. The *inappropriate* nature of absurdity (see definition above) is not merely an inherent feature but more likely to be an understatement of the tragic potential underpinning absurdity, as the inappropriateness of social practices systematically undermine the dignity of individuals (see the example in the introduction of C1, where due to bureaucracy, a mother is prohibited to buy grocery shopping for her daughter on welfare benefits).

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

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

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

Dimensions of the absurd

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

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

Foundations of Absurdity

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

The 'Normal'

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

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

The Abnormal

Nonetheless, the 'discovery' of a social practice as being abnormal opens up the possibility for the problematization of the concept of normality. Therefore, abnormal exists in the space between normal, absurd, and hypernormal and indicates the gap or the void that cannot be easily reached or grasped. It is here that an individual is confronted with the complexity of existence, and thus the notion that the abnormal inherently exists within and outside the normal: it is only because of the abnormal that the normal can exist. Normality, therefore, exists by virtue of setting a norm, to differentiate between what is right, that what is acceptable within the constraints of normality, while at the same time, *excluding* that what is considered to be abnormal, or deviating from the norm. Normality and abnormality also foreground the concept of authenticity. With the notion of normality, in particular when such normalization is projected through hegemonic forces in society, there is an implicit understanding of an authentic core that makes up a group of people jointly identifying (e.g., as a nation, a people, or a race). Any kind of abnormality is not only a deviation from the norm, of what one should be, but also a deviation from authenticity, from what is considered to be the root of one's existence, some kind of unspoiled, universal being. For instance, racism, xenophobia, othering and scapegoating all function through the creation of an in- and outgroup, the first one constituting the essence of normality and a myth of authenticity and the latter highlighting that what is not. This assumed sense of authenticity also functions as a mythologized inner core of a group of people that defines the essence of their group belongingness. For instance, during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many Ukrainian refugees were welcomed by European countries, and people were offering spare rooms in their houses to accommodate (white) Ukrainian refugees. It was noted here how these Ukrainian refugees were regarded as 'one of us, Europeans', and a much less welcoming attitude was present towards Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan and African refugees in the preceding decade, especially visible through Western media coverage. The primarily white population of Ukraine was considered part of the European authentic population (the in-group), and thus treated with human dignity, while this dignity was not bestowed upon the non-white refugees (including non-white refugees from Ukraine – the out-group). Hence, a notion of authenticity may underpin what and who are considered 'normal', and turned into a myth of the authentic people. Authenticity also indicates an internalized normalization within the individual, or a notion of an authentic core within the individual that makes up the person itself, defines who the person really is. It assumes a basis on which the individual stands in the world, and something that can be returned to if an individual feels lost, alienated or is treated with less dignity.

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

While abnormal could be considered a deviation from normality, a social practice that is absurd differentiates from normality in the dimensions described before. Absurdity differentiates from normality in exposing its i) tragic and dangerous nature, ii) its illogical, inappropriate and awkward nature, and iii) gap between pretense and reality. Hence, while abnormal refers to any deviation from normality, the absurd exposes itself through the combination of these factors. Absurdity also differentiates itself from abnormality, such that it actively transforms a notion of normality itself. While the abnormal could be considered a mirror image of normality, showing its functioning as normalizing that what ought to be differentiated from its exclusionary opposite, the absurd functions more as a magnifying lens, interrogating not just normality generally, but through highlighting the void within normality, the gap that was always present in normality itself. The mirror image of absurdity is therefore not normality, but the hypernormal.

The Hypernormal

The hypernormal reflects the exposure of absurdity and refers to that what is continuously concealed and taken-for-granted. Therefore, absurdity exposes the inherent emptiness of normality itself (which is ideologically interpreted and 'filled'; Bal et al., 2021). For instance, absurdity shows the emptiness of a European identity, and therefore moves beyond the normal-abnormal distinction (e.g., European-Non-European to distinguish between refugees who are welcome and not) into the interrogation of normality itself, exposing the inherent meaningless of normality. It is then here that we can start to observe the hypernormal: this arises as a social practice that is not merely normalized as part of social functioning, but when such social practice has become absurd and is concealed and hidden. The hypernormal is in continuous development, change and fluctuation, through which it is better to speak to hypernormalization as a process rather than a more static hypernormal entity. The hypernormal refers to the covering up of meaninglessness or maleficent, exclusionary intent of normalization processes. The hyper refers to the intensification of the process of normalization, whereby an invisible threshold is passed by a dominant/hegemonic group, and whereby normalization disintegrates into absurdity. For instance, while the welcoming and hospitable attitude towards Ukrainian refugees could be perceived as an appropriate and proper way to engage, it also amplified the underlying hypernormal – it was precisely this attitude that had been lacking for many years when only non-European refugees knocked on the doors of Europe after having taken unimaginable risks to get there. This also aggravated the undignified treatment of non-European refugees in exemplifying the existence of alternatives modes of opening up towards the rest of the world. The hypernormal also manifested when during the Ukrainian war, television news and talk shows are crowded with military experts and military historians who spoke in-depth about the Russian military strategy and progress, thereby too often implicitly speaking about the 'war games' (e.g., the proposed lack of rationality in Putin's strategic decision making about the war), projecting the enormous human suffering as a by-product of war, rather than the ethically only justifiable topic of discussion. Any kind of debate about military strategy could only be structured around the human suffering if not existing as a hypernormality. In this case, the Russian invasion into Ukraine represented a pure act of absurdity, where logic had dissolved altogether (but quickly transcending absurdity through the enormous suffering of the Ukranian people). Even though some parts of the invasion could be linked to military strategy textbooks, this did not exclude in any way the rather absurd nature of the invasion itself.

What Absurdity is not

To be able to have a meaningful contribution of the analysis of absurdity to the literatures in organization studies and work psychology, it is necessary to differentiate absurdity from related, existing concepts. Perhaps most directly related to the concept of absurdity is *paradox* or contradiction (Lewis, 2000; Putnam et al., 2016). It was Lewis (2000) who defined paradox as 'elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd when appearing simultaneously'. Is absurdity nothing more than paradox, which is a rather fashionable concept in contemporary organization studies (Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016)? As alluded to previously, absurdity extends *beyond* paradox, and therefore, in contrast to Lewis (2000), we do not maintain that every paradox is absurd. In support, it is notable how in subsequent work, it is not unanimously agreed upon that every paradox is absurd; while Schad et al. (2016) do not refer explicitly to the absurdity of paradox, it is still present in Putnam et al.'s (2016) work (both papers appearing in the same issue of Academy of Management Annals). While paradoxes may be absurd or have absurd outcomes (Putnam et al., 2016), they are not by definition absurd. For instance, the overview on the manifestations and variations of paradoxes by Schad et al. (2016) present a range of paradoxes, many of which are not necessarily absurd, such as a 'learning paradox', or the notion that new knowledge cannot be generated from old knowledge, otherwise it would not be new. While it is possible to locate absurdities within such paradoxes, it may also be too restrictive to assume paradoxes to merely exist within the space of absurdity (i.e., being illogical, inappropriate, indicated through a gap between rhetoric and reality, and in the context of this book, being tragic and dangerous). Earlier, we have refined the relationship between absurdity and paradox through establishing that absurdity arises from the *impossible* paradox, that is, where it is not merely about two or more reasonable logics creating contradiction and tension when joined together, but where logic dissolves altogether, and where none of the separate logics seems to be placed within a frame of rationality. Hence, absurdity always exists *beyond* paradox, it always transcends it into a deeper layer of human's existence in this world.

Absurdity is also not stupid (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Paulsen, 2017). For some years, a strand of literature has emerged around functional stupidity in organizations. While stupidity is described as the inability or unwillingness of people to mobilize their cognitive resources and intelligence, it touches upon the non-rational nature of absurdity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Stupidity refers to a situation where people refrain from reflection, justification, or 'substantive reasoning', and its conceptualization is heavily based upon a judgment of a situation or a person as not *smart,* but stupid. While stupidity does neither engage with the level of appropriateness or ethics as much as absurdity does (e.g., Alvesson and Spicer, 2012, ignore the question of stupidity in the context of ethics), nor does it engage with the gap between rhetoric and reality, it therefore speaks of a fundamentally different concept as absurdity (if it speaks about a meaningful concept anyway). Moreover, the term and description of stupidity assumes non-rationality to be stupid, which is rather uninformative both theoretically and conceptually. Using the concept of stupidity assumes being 'smart' as the desirable opposite (Alvesson and Spicer use 'smart' 24 times in their 2012 seminar paper on stupidity, posing stupidity as the 'other side to smartness', p.1198). Absurdity, however, elucidates the limitation of such approach by showing that there is no desirable opposite that creates order, efficiency and optimal functioning – instead absurdity highlights the importance of acknowledging the impossible paradox – there is simply no 'smart' alternative that could be located as the opposite of absurdity and which would remedy the tragic consequences of absurdity itself.

Moreover, recently, a strand of literature has emerged around the concept of bullshit management, bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2020; Spicer, 2020), and nonsense (Tourish, 2020). All of such terms refer to the meaninglessness of contemporary practices in society, organizational life, and academia. Such empty practices are indicative of our time, and refer to a rather vulgar description of what is happening in society and workplaces (not coincidentally coined by privileged white men in a provocative mood). It is also related to the rise of the 'post-truth era', in which fake news thrives, and has become part not just of society and public discourse, but as a tool for power. For instance, the deliberate strategy by Russia to feed the world a wide variety of fake news, propaganda, and mixed messages, not only confuses the public, but is also an effective tool home and abroad to gather support for the invading leaders. These terms refer to a disinterest in truth, and as such could be understood as absurdities of our contemporary era. However, it is also important to emphasize that while fake news and bullshit practices belong to the space of absurdity, of impossible paradoxes (e.g., against the Russian fake news propaganda, it is *not* just a matter of relying upon free Western media), it is also important to acknowledge the lack of 'reasonable alternative' – against fake news, there is no 'factual news' that is believable and should be preferred above the fake news/conspiracy theory. While on the one hand, fake news is nothing new, and has always been existing and strategically used by states, governments, and companies, on the other hand, the opposition fake news-truth is unhelpful as the dominant emphasis in many (Western) countries on 'the truth' ignores the multiple existing truths there are (but not in a post-modern sense that all truths are equal), and therefore, an absurdity-lens helps to overcome such limited binary distinction. If fake news has become absurd, it is more appropriate to locate an escape out of this post-truth era through a radical alternative (Žižek, 2009), rather than merely proposing the opposite of fake news (a Western hegemonic, neoliberal version of the truth) as a globally generalizable solution. For instance, McCarthy et al. (2020) propose 'critical thinking' as a way of dealing with workplace bullshit. However, is it not precisely the case that conspiracy thinkers start as critical thinkers, reflecting critically on societal practices, before starting to see patterns among events and practices that lead up to potentially absurd conspiracy theories? It is unlikely to maintain that critical thinking works as a panacea against fake news, while it may actually be an important indicator for the rise of such. It is, however, interesting how according to Tourish (2020), academia and management research has also been penetrated by nonsense, with a dominance of 'bombastic style, starved of metaphor, wit or irony' (p. 101). The phenomenon seems to be more commonplace than assumed, and also present in academic research. It remains interesting to analyze how absurdity has also manifested in academia and academic research, and Tourish (2020) presents some interesting examples of studies that are meaningless.

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

Absurdity Normalized: Introducing Hypernormalization

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

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

Theoretical Background of Hypernormalization

Hypernormalization was coined by the Russian-born anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2003, 2005). Yurchak investigated the paradoxes in Soviet society that contributed to the sudden collapse of the Soviet system in the late 1980s (Yurchak, 2003; 2005), and in particular the paradox of eternity and stagnation which was central to life in the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the Soviet Union seemed to exhibit eternal existence, while on the other hand, quality of life and the system itself were stagnating. The death of Stalin in 1953 created a discursive vacuum, as no longer the supreme Master lived who could authorize public discourse. In response, the ruling elite decided to stick to the authoritative discourse allowed during the Stalin era. Consequently, ideological representations (such as media expressions, rituals and formal structures) were perfectly replicated over time (Yurchak, 2003), such that they became heteronyms, or context-independent. For instance, the writing of the articles for the newspaper Pravda involved a very close monitoring and hyperfocus on reproducing the discourse as allowed under Stalin (Yurchak, 2005). The effect of this ideological reproduction of texts and cultural symbols was that their literal meaning became increasingly dissociated from their 'real' constative meaning. This reproduction of form became the way Soviet society and practices were maintained by the rulers, and as such ideological enunciations represented 'objective truths' (Yurchak, 2005, p.10). However, these ideological texts and symbols became an end in themselves and increasingly 'frozen' (Yurchak, 2005, p.26).

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

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

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

Hypernormalization in Contemporary Society

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

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

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

Hypernormalization moves beyond Normalization

There is well established literature on normalization in organizational settings. This literature is informative for our understanding of hypernormalization, and our conceptualization moves significantly beyond the more trite observations underpinning normalization. While normalization theory assumes a process of institutionalization of social practices, it hardly engages with the term itself, and in particularly the ‘norm’ that is so crucially part of normalization. While there are certainly functional elements in normalization of practices and rituals for stability and predictability, we also observe a blurring of the distinction between normalization and hypernormalization. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to assess whether a practice is normalized as a result of democratic, consensus-based approaches, or whether it is hypernormalized through hegemonic actors influencing public discourse, or internalized through ideological fantasy. Hence, normalization may always carry the potential of hypernormalization, in its inability to engage with the concept of normality itself.

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

Hypernormalization differentiates itself from normalization in two essential ways. First, where normalization may have positive effects for setting a norm that creates predictability of expected behaviors (May & Finch, 2009), hypernormalization creates a norm of the absurd becoming accepted into expected behavioral patterns. While there is no clear logical argument for maintenance of a certain practice, it can still be observed how a social practice that is absurd emerges and is maintained. In contrast to normalization, hypernormalization departs from the position of absurdity, whose emergence and maintenance transcend beyond rationality. It is also notable in normalization theory (May & Finch, 2009) how the process of normalization is described as a primarily, or even purely, cognitive process, that is guided through a (conceptual) model, in which coherent, meaningful qualities of social practices are perceived to spur a process of collective engagement, collective action, and reflective monitoring. It is striking how normalization in such models is proposed to unfold as a primarily rational process, in which the illogicality of practices is absent, as if only rational practices become normalized. Our current conceptualization of hypernormalization may respond to such lack in previous work.

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

Effects of Hypernormalization

Hypernormalization fulfills multiple functions, such as predictability and stability in society even when its detrimental effects become increasingly clear (Žižek, 2018). For instance, while the hypernormalization and institutionalization of white supremacy in the US (Shor, 2020) has deeply affected Black people's lives, it remains normalized as it offers stability to white citizens. It is important to understand the complexities and dynamics underpinning the normalization of the absurd in society as it does not only play an essential part in the translation of ideology into practice; it also has various detrimental effects for individuals and society at large. It can be observed how absurdities (such as the Trump presidency in the US) paved the way for a revival of misogyny and racism in society (Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018; Shor, 2020). Moreover, normalization of absurdity undermines democracy, the redistribution of power to the people, and the possibilities of a society that protects vulnerable people as well as the planet more widely (Bal, 2017). In other words, while absurdity produces systemic suffering of people and the planet, hypernormalization delegitimizes claims for the systemic causes of suffering. It is therefore needed to understand in-depth how hypernormalization functions.

Dynamics of Hypernormalization at Collective Level

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

Four mechanisms underpin the collective normalization of absurdity in society and workplaces: institutionalization, rationalization, creation of a lack of alternative (Bal, 2017; Nicholls, 2017), and socialization (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; May & Finch, 2009). Institutionalization, or the routinization of practices (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; May & Finch, 2009), plays a key role in hypernormalization. When the absurd becomes embedded into daily practices and established as part of shared memory (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), it becomes institutionalized and becomes part of the normal behaviors which are expected of citizens. In this instance, collective memory projects expected norms upon individuals, and legitimizes absurdity as 'how things are done'. When absurdity becomes routine, it is less likely to be questioned openly, through which it is further institutionalized into normative behavior. Routinizing also contributes to greater efficiency, as individuals have to devote less energy into questioning why and how they ought to behave. Moreover, people become desensitized after repeated exposure to absurdity, and their responses to the stimulus weakens, and ultimately individuals become mindless towards absurdity.

Furthermore, rationalization of absurdity occurs when social practices are perceived to be 'just how things are' and thus entirely normal. It effectively serves as a social construction aimed at neutralizing claims for contestation of a hypernormalized practice and its inherent ambiguities, and at the same time, making compliance with a practice or system desirable. Ashforth and Anand (2003) identified various types of rationalization, including legality (that a practice is not illegal), denial of individual or collective responsibility, and denial of injury or victimhood. Rationalization occurs primarily in the first stages of hypernormalization, where a practice or system is still questioned by in- or outsiders. Rationalization enables members to defend themselves and others to critique. While absurdity is about the irrational (Starkey et al., 2019), rationalization effectively functions as a masking of the unspoken, ideological underpinnings of absurd practice itself (Jost et al., 2017; Žižek, 1989). Rationalization is an important aspect, as it directly confronts with the possibility of absurdity-denial; through rationalization, hegemonic actors in society can portray practices as entirely normal, or merely enough, thereby effectively denying the very existence of absurdity, or mitigating the seriousness of a practice. For instance, the discussion about and implementation of gender quota serve as an effective tool to deny the absurdity of gender inequalities in society. Through positioning the necessity of for instance 30% women on corporate boards, it is possible to *both* deny the existence of the absurdity of gender inequality, *and* portray effective action against gender inequalities while presenting it as a problem that can be solved through technical fixes (i.e., quota that can be monitored, assessed, implemented). The actual absurdity underlying the very need for quota to remedy gender inequality is obfuscated through the emphasis on the measures themselves and the discussion whether a certain percentage would be enough. Again, we find the notion that monitoring and controlling reality offer credible, technical, solutions to absurd problems in society.

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

Finally, socialization enables hypernormalization to become fully institutionalized over time (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). When newcomers (e.g., younger generations) are socialized (or enculturated) into perceiving absurdity as normal and expected, they may fail to acknowledge that a certain practice is 'absurd' through a lack of reflection, or even develop favorable views of an absurd practice, either because it facilitates an individuals' own attitudes and standing, or because it appeals to an ideological belief in a system and becomes internalized (Jost et al., 2017). Socialization occurs in every context, and allows societies and organizations to shift discourses over time. For instance, during the 1970-80s Reagan presidency in the US, the top tax bracket was 70%, whereas it is currently 35% in the US (Vox, 2019). The enculturation shift in societal discourse to what can be considered 'normal' has also been referred to as the shifting Overton Window (Beck, 2010). The Overton Window identifies the discourse in society that can be considered normal and acceptable, and this 'window' can shift over time, as a result of (hyper-)normalization. Hence, while in the 1970s the top tax bracket was 70%, the Overton Window has changed during the last decades such that 35% is the 'new normal', thereby facilitating the hypernormalization of income inequality (and increasingly low taxes for the rich). This has been made possible through the socialization of new generations into normalization of lower tax rates, and consequentially ever-rising income inequality, even though it is now widely established that income and associated forms of inequality is rising (Partington, 2019). Socialization into hypernormalization also influences newcomers' abilities and motivations to speak up against absurd practices, who will be more likely to be compliant. In conjunction with the notion of a lack of alternatives, hypernormalization becomes a seemingly perpetual state. This is also present in Yurchak's discussions (2003), where it was argued that the Soviet state 'was forever, until it was no more'. The perception of the 'eternal' Soviet Union was precisely based on the notion of the hypernormalization of the illogical through the acceptance of absurdity as the state of normality, thereby projecting the absurd as the ever-lasting standard which was supported through 'reproduction of form'. In the perpetual reproduction of ideological symbols (propaganda, newspapers, cultural symbols), absurdity was both normalized (i.e., the inherent meaninglessness of ideological symbols became invisible in their continuous reproduction, through which people were desensitized to their meaninglessness), and presenting itself at the front stage (i.e., with the rising gap between public discourse and actual manifestation, such ever-rising gap could not be concealed forever). Hence, hypernormalization is always only partially effective, as it is in continuous need of approval and reinforcement, which are easier to achieve in authoritarian and hegemonic states (such as the Soviet Union) than in Western countries with freedom of press and free will. Nonetheless, an important aspect of hypernormalization concerns psychological internalization, a topic that we will address in depth in the subsequent chapter.

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