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The Absurd Workplace
How Absurdity is
Normalized in
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Chapter 3: Ideological Underpinnings of Absurdity and Hypernormalization

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In this chapter, the ideological underpinnings of absurdity and its normalization are explored. First, the chapter discusses a psychology of absurdity in order to understand the functioning of absurdity within the individual psyche. Furthermore, the chapter discusses how the fantasmatic investment in and internalization of absurdity enable individuals to manage the absurdities arising from the perpetual gap between authoritative discourse (e.g., companies' commitment to climate action) and actual day-to-day practices (e.g., companies' continued investment in fossil fuels). The chapter explicitly links absurdity and hypernormalization to its ideological functioning and is based on Žižek's theory of ideology-as-fantasy-construction. In this theory, absurdity and its normalization can be understood to function ideologically and are maintained through the emergence and development of a fantasy of normality. This serves a strong psychological function, in providing a feeling of security and sense-of-self (i.e., ontological security). The chapter finishes with a discussion of the threat that the exposure of absurdity poses to the ontological security of the individual.

Introduction

Concepts of absurdity and hypernormalization are firmly rooted in the notion of a sense of 'normality' or a projected norm that informs what could be considered socially acceptable and that which deviates from this norm. This sense of normality is by definition grounded in fantasy, or a sub- or unconscious desire for structure and predictability (Žižek, 2006). If absurdity constitutes a deviation from perceived 'normality', it is this sense of normality that functions as a fantasy that is violently disrupted through absurdity. Absurdity, therefore, plays multiple roles in establishing a counterpart towards normality, and more precisely, it plays a fundamental role in the process of hypernormalization. In this chapter, we will interrogate such roles, and in so doing, we will use an ideology-lens to study absurdity and hypernormalization. As hypernormalization is about the process of taking for granted and normalizing that what is perceived to be absurd, it touches closely upon ideology, and particular in relation to a Žižekian approach to ideology (Žižek, 1989; 2009, 2010, 2018; see also Seeck et al., 2020 for an overview of the different perspectives on and uses of ideology). We will therefore discuss absurdity and hypernormalization through an ideological lens, in order to be able to formulate responses to the questions *why* absurdity is normalized, why people retain their belief in normality despite of its inherent absurdist features, and thus why hypernormalization is maintained. For instance, when the gap between authoritative discourse and really existing practices in the Soviet Union became absurd, causing discourse to become more and more impotent in describing actual affairs in society, it did not mean that people massively disengaged from such discourse. Instead, Yurchak's (2005) research showed how people (at least partially) retained their belief in authoritative discourse, and disavowed the absurdist nature of such discourse. Hence, the interplay between authoritative discourse and 'really existing practices' was more complex than manifesting purely as binary distinction. People continued to invest in the appealing nature of discourse, even though daily experience would contradict such discourse. It was also in the notion of 'everything was forever' (Yurchak, 2005) that a promise of a better future was contained, a promise that discourse would be materialized in a later time, while the present was a temporary struggle towards a better life in the future. To understand why this was the case, and why people retain their beliefs in hypernormalization, we introduce the concept of ideological fantasy to the study of absurdity and hypernormalization. We discuss how absurdity itself functions as a fantasy that people hold about the world and their own lives. Moreover, absurdity could also be understood as the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized (Žižek, 1989), or that what is also described as the Real in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. It is not surprising that absurdity may have tragic and dangerous potential, if functioning as either of these two possibilities. In the following chapter, we will discuss in greater depth these constellations of absurdity. Nonetheless, before doing so, we will first discuss the psychological analysis of absurdity.

A Psychology of the Absurd

Absurdity has not received much attention in psychology or management, and usually has been referred to primarily in the context of absurdist literature, such as the work of Franz Kafka, Leonora Carrington and Fernando Pessoa, or philosophers such as Albert Camus and Søren Kierkegaard. However, psychologists have thus far refrained to engage directly with the role of absurdity in the psychology of the human being, and thus how absurdity informs the psyche (i.e., the mind or soul) of people and their behavior. While so far we have discussed the roles of predictability and need for stability (see also Proulx et al., 2010) as a result of being confronted with absurdity, such perspectives are dominated by the assessment of absurdity as threatening and *de*-stabilizing. However, absurdity should also be perceived in a different light, whereby absurdity and its normalization are not merely a threat to the

individual's need for stability and predictability, but whereby a process of sensemaking may unfold which deviates from an understanding of absurdity as fantasy. However, such sensemaking processes may unfold primarily as deviations from the dominant response we can observe to the confrontation with absurdity. Hence, it will be necessary first to discuss such dominant responses, after which we will take a look at the divergent responses to absurdity, such as embracing absurdity (Camus, 1942).

The experience of absurdity is neither purely within the person nor is it purely in the world outside the person, but always in the exchange between a person and the world (Camus, 1942). While Camusian philosophy argues that the meaninglessness of life in the face of the inevitability of death leads to a profound absurd experience, it is not merely the case that absurd life experiences are by definition related to the meaninglessness of life. Extending the understanding of absurdity to a broader experience, it is true that people are continuously confronted with absurdities of contemporary life and society. It is in our current time almost impossible for individuals in (Western) society to dissociate oneself from the absurdities penetrating daily existence. For instance, the rise of income inequality has become absurd. While inequality has been addressed in academic circles for decades, it was the publication of Piketty (2013), and to a lesser extent the work of Stiglitz (2012) and others, that raised global attention to the issue of inequality, which became a topic that has been widely debated in popular media. With the report of Oxfam Novib (2022) showing that eight men own as much as the poorest half of the global population, it can be ascertained that wealth inequality has become properly absurd. Such absurdities define the contemporary era, and confront the individual with a society in which there is fundamentally an incongruence between the notion of 'civilization' and the actual manifestations of neoliberal capitalist society. It is in this vein that comparisons can be made with the late Soviet Union, where public discourse became increasingly detached from actual practice and ideological rule. Along the same lines, the individual in contemporary Western society is also confronted with the discrepancy between the promise of civilized, capitalist society (e.g., the so-called 'capitalism with a human face' which was the inherent promise of liberal democracy, Žižek, 2018), and the crumbling of certainties within this civilization (e.g., the growing lack of affordable housing, reliable public transport, and an income safety net). While the economic crisis of 2007-8 profoundly influenced wealth and real income for many people negatively, it did not cause a fundamental rupture within Western society: the status-quo remained, and there was never any proper attempt to redefine the structures of society, in a way that not only a next crisis would be prevented, but also in a way that redistributive justice would prevail. It was therefore not surprising to observe that 15 years later, the core structures of Western society have remained intact, leading to an ever-increasing absurd society. It can still be observed how grand absurdities remain unchallenged, including inequalities, climate change, racism, populism and the decline of democracy (Bal, 2017; Brown, 2019). For the individual, these absurdities are all-surrounding and omnipresent, defining our contemporary experience of life.

Yet, at the same time, the modern individual is also capable of leading one's life without the constant awareness of the inherent absurdity of life and the world. Most individuals live their lives, go to work, commute, eat and sleep, without wondering about the meaning of their lives. For instance, verbal communication between people is grounded on the acceptance and reliance of a set of complex rules (Žižek, 2006). Many of these rules are followed blindly, without being aware of them, and it is only upon conscious reflection that one is becoming aware of *some* of these rules. However, there are also many rules that dictate interpersonal behavior and relationships which are unconscious or belong to a more obscene or traumatic space, and are more hidden in order to keep up appearance (Žižek, 2006, p.9). Hence, when people interact with and interrelate to others, their speech and behavior are guided through implicit norms, many of which they are not conscious of. When absurdity

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

According to Camus (1942; Bakewell, 2016), it is only when a breakdown occurs, that people start to ask themselves what the meaning of life entails, and when they may become aware of the absurdity surrounding them, as something being inherent to contemporary existence. It is in such a collapse that a moment of clarity may unfold, one where one is able to see clearly the absurdity of it all. However, it is also questionable to what extent such moments actually take place in an individual's life, and how profound these moments truly are, and whether they have lasting impact on the individual. For instance, while the Covid-19 pandemic affected the world as a whole in 2020 onwards, it is also remarkable how despite of claims of a 'new normal' (e.g., social distancing during the pandemic, the wearing of face masks, but *also* a revaluing of nature and non-capitalist lifestyles), a speedy return to the 'old normal' could be witnessed in those countries where vaccination campaigns controlled the spread of the virus. While many writings had appeared that called for a fundamental rethinking of the economy and society in a post-Covid world, it was also striking how quickly people returned to their old lifestyles (e.g., flying to holiday destinations and maintain their consumerist lives spending on high streets or online). Ironically, work psychologists and organizational scholars have seemed to be primarily obsessed with the issue of working from home during and after the pandemic, and their visions of a 'new normal' have referred mainly to the possibility for office-based work to be conducted from home. Hence, it is likely that the Camusian moment of clarity is a rather rare event, or even more so, an event which can be actively disavowed. In Lacanian theory, it is hysteria that emerges when an individual starts to question one's discomfort in the symbolic identity, or the crumbling of certainty and meaning in the face of the absurd nature of social practice. Absurdity, therefore, is not surprisingly usually concealed, hidden, and perhaps harder to detect than initially theorized. If absurdity awareness may lead to hysteria, it is not surprising that individuals may deploy a range of defense mechanisms in order to avoid being exposed to an experience of absurdity. The example from the Covid-19 pandemic is therefore informative: while this pandemic constituted a rather monumental experience of disruption of daily life, a disruption of all certainties built in neoliberal-capitalist society (i.e., the possibility of work, consumption, and free movement), it is also striking how even though this pandemic should be perceived as a global traumatic event, it disappeared in lieu of a rather old notion of normality when restrictions were lifted across Western countries. The tenacity of neoliberal-capitalist lifestyles trumps even the greatest disruptions to daily life. In other words, the defense mechanisms employed include not only a deliberate disavowal of the existence of absurdity, but also a hypernormalization of absurdity. Such hypernormalization would reason that while pandemics are unfortunate, they are part of history and therefore constitute only temporary glitches in the course of (ongoing) societal progress. People generally indicated that they wanted to 'get on with their lives' when restrictions were lifted. Similar beliefs in (eternal) societal progress (see e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018) also include perceptions that the world is moving towards a carbon-zero society, whereby the current fossil-fuel economy can smoothly be transitioned into an entire renewable energy society.

Hence, if we are to postulate a psychology of absurdity, it should engage first of all with the question why absurdity is absent, not only in the psychological literature, but more profoundly in the notion of absence from individual awareness. It is here that we propose two explanations, both based on the work of Žižek (1989, 2001, 2009), and in particular the notion of ideological fantasy. As argued above, absurdity may function as a fantasy itself, but it may also function as the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized (i.e., the Real or the void in Lacanian theory). First, absurdity may function as fantasy itself, and in particular a fantasy of normality, which is then disavowed. In this meaning, absurdity belongs to the space of the Lacanian Symbolic, which is closely related to the Lacanian Imaginary, which is also the domain of fantasy (with the triad Symbolic-Imaginary-Real constituting the building blocks of human existence in Lacanian theory). The Symbolic order refers to the symbolic structures of and within society, and links strongly to authoritative discourse, in its shaping of these symbolic structures. To indicate the Symbolic, one can borrow from the notion of the noble lie by Plato (Žižek, 2010). The Symbolic incorporates the noble lie to serve society a narrative that extends beyond general experience. The idea here is that society and the people deserve better, and that current existing social circumstances are only a temporary state that are soothed through the promise of a better future, one of harmony, notwithstanding actually existing societal struggle and exploitation. The Symbolic, therefore, becomes shaped through public discourse, this discourse functioning more in line with the noble lie than describing actual experienced social practice. The symbolic structure encapsulates an ideal description, thereby being closely linked to the space of the Imaginary, which informs the symbolic structures in society. The Imaginary captures the space of fantasy, and it is here that we can observe the first functioning of absurdity. When the Symbolic, or public discourse which is both orchestrated and spontaneously emerging, describes that which is publicly accepted enunciation, it links to the Imaginary through the supporting role of fantasy in sustaining and maintaining the symbolic structure. Hence, they work hand in hand to regulate social interaction through positing public discourse (i.e., the noble lie), which is then confirmed unconsciously through the support of fantasy in sustaining belief in the symbolic structure. Social practices which could then be classified as absurd, are counteracted through the functioning of imagination, through which the absurd itself manifests as a fantasy in which all is normal, taken for granted and accepted as is. In this way, absurdity functions as a fantasy to deny itself. The fantasy includes the sense of absurdity as normal which, in other words, is a fantasy that actively denies the absurdity from existing. We are confronted here with an active denial of the existence of absurdity through fantasmatic involvement in a sense of normality. This often manifests as a belief in the abnormal as something that is extraneous to normality, or merely a byproduct or externality of civilization. It is not conceived as inherent to normality. Hence, normality can only be conceptualized on the basis of the disavowal of absurdity to contrast a notion of normality. For instance, in many Western European countries, a sense of self or national identity was never that strong in explicit, well-known terms (especially for smaller countries), but became reified through the entry of the Other (most notably refugees and immigrants who 'looked' differently, spoke another language, and had different cultural traditions). Hence, a sense of what is considered to be 'normal' and part of one's identity could only be imagined through the appearance of what is excluded, exposing the underlying absurdity of identity-supporting exclusionary normality. This sense of normality obfuscates the very notion of absurdity, through which absurdity is denied and fantasy takes over. It is in this sense that we observe the functioning of absurdity as fantasy, whereby fantasmatic involvement precludes the very exposure of absurdity. In Lacanian terminology, desire as acted out in fantasy is not so much about the question what one wants, and not even about what the other wants, but about what the other wants me to want. In other words, the fantasy of normality can be conceptualized as resulting from an individual's desire

to want what the other wants the individual to want. This complex interplay about the lack of direct access to what one wants (and perceives), manifests in a desire for what could be externally composed as 'normal', or the desire of an individual to fit in, to comply and confirm for mere acceptance and inclusion into social groups. This way, absurdity is repressed by the individual, as of its explosive potential to unmask the impotence of normality and consequently normality falling apart. It is thus, as alluded to before, not surprising to see the denial of absurdity for a sense of normality to protect ontological security and social belonging. However, we can also assess absurdity is not merely the denial through fantasy, but may also function at another level.

A second possibility for absurdity, therefore, is to belong to the space of the Lacanian Real, or the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized (Žižek, 1989). Normality, through its reification in public discourse, or within the symbolic structures of society, is projected as a space of reality. In other words, that which is commonly perceived to be our reality is also filled with concepts of normality – reality is normal, until it is not. For instance, during the pandemic a realization emerged of abnormality, or even absurdity, when the structures of contemporary capitalist life were threatened (i.e., when lockdowns paralyzed societies worldwide). However, the lifting of restrictions, or a return to 'normality' also meant a return to reality as an encapsulation of the symbolic structures with the Imaginary. In contrast to the disavowed absurdity within the symbolic structures and imaginary fantasmatic level, we can observe the third part of the order of human existence, the Real, to expose another functioning of absurdity. This pertains to the void that is left in the Symbolic and the Imaginary, and is also referred to as the traumatic kernel that cannot be symbolized (Žižek, 1989). It is here that we can locate the second functioning of absurdity, and refers to the more traumatic nature of absurdity as can be ascertained in social practice. While absurdity is commonly understood as that which transcends reason and logic, it is the space of the Real where we can find absurdity proper, in that which is not captured through the Symbolic. When the Symbolic is the collective of public discourse, and in extension all symbolic structures that regulate social interaction and society as such, there is also the space which cannot be covered by the Symbolic, that which is more traumatic and absurd. In other words, where the Symbolic fails, and thus where a gap or void is created, we can observe absurdity to manifest. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic elucidated the need for normality that drove especially Western societies to a pre-existing order after the restrictions were lifted, thereby not just exposing the absurdity of the sense of normality that was desired to return to (in its full exclusionary, neoliberal capitalist mode), but in deeper terms, still concealing the more traumatic nature of the pandemic itself, as something that is deeply traumatic and containing profound psychological effects on societies and individuals. While referred to here and there (e.g., Silver, 2020; Stanley et al., 2021), the traumatic nature of the pandemic has been rather underacknowledged, and poorly understood. An understanding of the pandemic as manifesting as an externality, as an event that can be interpreted in historical terms (while being compared to earlier plagues such as the London 1665 plague, the Spanish Flu or to other zoonotic diseases such as AIDS, Garrett, 1998), does not suffice to capture the traumatic impact. For instance, the rapid spread across the globe could only be explained in relation to the globalized capitalist economy with free and unlimited movement of both goods and people across the world, enabling the spread of the virus across the world in a period of weeks. The reporting of hospitalizations and casualties by the media in the first year of the pandemic highlighted the nature of the deadly virus, but disappeared when the pandemic was 'controlled' through the vaccinations. However, the total (global) death count for the pandemic became an abstract and almost meaningless number, but nonetheless exposes one major conclusion, that of the traumatic absurdity of the pandemic. The pandemic, in other words, acted not just as a global event that affected the entire world population, but also

foregrounds the impact of climate change: while the entire global population will be affected by it, it also exposes in the inequalities between the most vulnerable people and societies that are at greatest risk and the well-off, the privileged individuals and societies, who were able to escape their predicament (Pérez-Nebra et al., 2021). Moreover, this trauma not only relies upon the structural systemic features that determine the course of the pandemic, but also the inherently linked nature of the pandemic, the neoliberal-capitalist system, and the associated problems of contemporary global society, such as climate change and inequality. As mentioned previously, the pandemic would fit conceptually into the great absurdity of our time (i.e., the destruction of our planet for economic profit), and thus it is not so much a discussion of how the pandemic linked to the global issues of today (e.g., inequality, climate change), but it should be a discussion on how the pandemic is inherently structured within neoliberal capitalism. While zoonotic viruses have caused pandemics throughout (recent) history and across the world, and therefore are nothing new, the current pandemic has elucidated the traumatic absurdity of our contemporary socioeconomic-political system. This is also what constitutes the void in the discussions on the pandemic, that which cannot be symbolized, cannot be captured through public discourse and symbolic structures that define general perception of what has occurred during the pandemic. This notion of absurdity as trauma is the second way through which it could be understood to function psychoanalytically. Psychologically, people escape the Real through fantasy, and as such reality can be an escape for people (Žižek, 2006). Hence, reality is not a spontaneously emerging perspective for people, but an (retro-)actively constructed escape from the more traumatic experiences of the Real. To reiterate, reality is that what is commonly seen by the individual as how the world is shaped and how it is functioning. Yet, as Žižek (1989) explains, our conception of reality is shaped ideologically, as fantasy structures our perception of reality. The Real, in contrast, exposes the more traumatic side of absurdity in the void itself that cannot be captured by fantasy. The estimated global death count for Covid-19 of more than 6 million people (WHO, 2022) represents such traumatic kernel, the absurdity of the human cost of the global pandemic.

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

Hypernormalization of Absurdity at the Individual Level

As described in the previous chapter, hypernormalization emerges and maintains itself at the collective level through institutionalization, rationalization, lack of alternative and socialization. However, the question is how individuals cope with hypernormalization in society when they are faced with the earlier described collective practices. In addition to the above analysis of the psychology of absurdity, we discuss three interrelated processes:

ideological fantasy, internalization and disavowal. These explain how individuals are gripped by absurdities and maintain their beliefs in the absurd whilst faced at the same time with the rise of counterevidence. For instance, while the ever-rising income inequality becomes more absurd over time (World Economic Forum, 2019), it is insufficient to raise awareness of such matters to achieve a countermovement and a more equal wealth distribution. As absurdity does not concern itself with truth claims per se, rational arguments about the (un-)truthfulness of absurdity do not effectively address the issue (Bal, 2017). This is because of ideological fantasy about hypernormalization and the possibility for ontological security within absurdity (Mitzen, 2006). While it could be argued that absurdity functions as a threat to one's security, it is actually the explicit acknowledgement and conscious separation from absurdity that causes ontological *in*security (Croft, 2012) or hysteria (Žižek, 2006), as it entails a conscious breach from the established order within one's environment. Hence, while absurdity arises from the illogical gap between proclamation and reality, it is this gap which provides the ontological foundation for ideological fantasy and maintenance of hypernormalization (Žižek, 2018).

Therefore, hypernormalization is maintained through ideological investment, and particularly the development of ideological fantasy of normality in absurdity. Hence, while absurdity as fantasy functions as an explanation of the psychology of absurdity, we accordingly use the idea of ideological fantasy to explain the hypernormalization of absurdity. We use ideology in the conceptualization of philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a 'fantasy construction which serves as a support for reality itself' (Žižek, 1989, p.45) - see also Seeck et al. (2020). Hence, fantasy which underpins ideology in Žižekian thinking is not disconnected from reality, but offers reality itself. Therefore, ideological enunciation, such as Communist ideals within Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2005), or meritocratic ideals in liberal-capitalism (Su, 2015), have an important fantasmatic logic (Glynos, 2008), in constituting and maintaining beliefs among individuals that what is proclaimed can not only be achieved, but also structures reality itself. For instance, a fantasy of meritocracy may not bear a strong relationship with really-existing practices in society (Littler, 2013; Van Dijk et al., 2020), but may form an ideological reference that structures society as if it does exist.

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

As a result, absurdity itself is denied and thereby maintained, and rationalized through adaptation of perceptions of what valid norms of society are (Haack & Siewecke, 2018). Yet, the fantasmatic logic does not fully explain the dynamics underpinning individual responses to hypernormalization. We therefore discuss the role of internalization and disavowal (Žižek 1989, 2001) in relation to the psychological dimensions underpinning the maintenance of

hypernormalization. The question is how individuals in modern society are gripped by hypernormalization, and why individuals continue to fantasize about and invest in hypernormalization to maintain a sense of ontological security. If a critical mass within society or an organization would recognize the absurdity of their predicament, why do they not resist individually and collectively, such that this gap between proclaimed ideals within society (i.e., the official ideologies) and reality is decreased, and such that these ideals do not merely have a symbolic function, but a truly constative one? While Žižek (1989, 2018) points to the very problematic nature of the official ideology itself and the impossibility of transforming empty signifiers of ideology into practices (e.g., brotherhood, equality and meritocracy), people also maintain their individual psychological belief and investment in absurdity. In other words, just like in the Soviet Union, there is no binary split between public discourse and really existing practices, as individuals are engaged both in the performative and constative dimension of modern ideology, thereby continuing to internalize absurdity. In line with Žižek (1989, p.12, 2001), this attitude can be explained on the basis of cynical disavowal: 'I know very well that we are confronted with absurdity, but I still fully participate in its performative dimension'. This plays out largely in the unconscious domain as a fantasy, and influences actual human behavior. Yet, it may only partially be acknowledged by people when explicitly confronted with it, or even dismissed as untrue. In other words, absurdity is currently upfront, and no longer hidden from the public eye and thereby fully integrated into public discourse (e.g., rising inequality is now acknowledged by the very institutions responsible for the creation of it, see e.g., the World Economic Forum, 2019). People can thus no longer deny that absurdity exists, such as increasing inequality, but have become cynical about it, and disavowing the integrated nature of absurdity into the fabric of society. Meanwhile, they may fantasize about the meritocratic structure of society that would legitimize inequality (Van Dijk et al., 2020). As long as people maintain a fantasmatic investment into meritocracy, they are able to blame people who fail for not working hard enough for it, while the 'winners' can be celebrated for their entrepreneurial spirit. Disavowal thus works hand in hand with fantasmatic involvement into ideology.

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

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

Through internalization of absurdity into one's core beliefs about the structure of society, people fantasize that there is *no* gap between enunciation and really existing practices, and therefore they feel as if they do not have to engage in performative rituals of reproduction of form, but are merely engaged in the constative dimension of authoritative discourse (i.e., they believe their behavior is directly constitutive of reality). Hence, hypernormalization unfolds via the fantasy of correspondence: authoritative discourse is constitutive of reality in this fantasy, and any possible traumatic Real is denied. For instance, the absurdity of proclaimed commitment of large fossil-fuel companies to sustainability and climate action (Brown, 2016) vis-à-vis the real environmental destruction by these companies and their role in climate disaster is disavowed, whereby the fantasy of commitment to combat climate change is sustained. Therefore, there is 'pseudo-genuine' belief in that such companies should be at the forefront of the transition to a zero-carbon society, and that their greenwashing attempts through advertising are ultimately authentic and well meant. In this fantasy, absurdity itself is still denied, and people fantasize about how they engage themselves in the constative dimensions of climate action when they recycle their waste, even though recycling does not significantly address any of the issues around climate change (Blühdorn, 2017; Brown, 2016). Hence, recycling is *not nearly radical enough*, when fossil fuel companies continue on their path of planetary destruction. This also indicates that individuals are pragmatic translators of authoritative discourse; while practice may not have a meaningful relation to discourse, people continue to act as if it does, and may thereby maintain their beliefs in the system and the hypernormalized nature of society. Moreover, the more traumatic aspects of the Real of climate change are disavowed, and normalized through ignorance.

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

Advanced Stages of Hypernormalization

In other words, it seems that we are entering a new stage of hypernormalization, where despite global attention to the pressing issues in society and workplace, hypernormalization seems to be strengthened even more. In this case, drawing the attention to the problematic features in contemporary society may ultimately serve a conservative agenda of retaining the status-quo. After all, testifying 'authentic' concern about these issues (see e.g., proclaiming commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals from the United Nations) may come with reputational benefit, while actual action towards properly addressing these issues may be less visible, if not absent. This further sustains the ultimate fantasy of normality, and helps individuals to retain ontological security. Moreover, it is observable how the analysis from Yurchak (2005) compares to contemporary society: individuals may not be disengaged from authoritative discourse (e.g., 'truly' believing in the ideals of meritocracy and genuine commitment to climate change), while at the same time observing how daily reality is

opposed to such commitments. To be able to pragmatically cope with this ongoing gap between discourse and reality, the role of fantasy becomes even more important: it is no longer because of the suppressed nature of societal problems that absurdity does not manifest easily to people, but *despite* of continuous attention to such problems that people invest more fantasmatic energy into hypernormalization. Despite the severity of societal problems, unconscious fantasy helps to perceive politicians and business leaders expressing a genuine commitment, and often narratives of hope and delayed gratification sustain order and acquiescence. For instance, the concept of hope becomes fashionable again, as a necessary means to avoid depression, anxiety, and despair. Yet, just as in the Soviet Union, the costs of maintaining hypernormalization in the face of rising absurdity become higher and higher. Meanwhile, more and more people fall through the cracks in the system, and rising numbers of depression can be witnessed (e.g., Bell & Blanchflower, 2019). Notwithstanding the varied range of possibilities of explaining lack of well-being in contemporary society, the rising numbers of depression could also be indicative of fantasy ceasing to remain functional in relation to hypernormalizing the status-quo, whereby people experience dissolution into absurdity awareness and despair. In this case, it is a matter of either re-strengthening hypernormalization processes, whereby people, notwithstanding counterevidence, remain invested in absurdity disavowal and normality ("even though I am continuously confronted with societal events which no longer make any sense, I continue to live my life pretending normality"), or it is a case of escalating absurdity hysteria (Žižek, 2006).

Absurdity hysteria creates the possibility for the 'absurd moment', the moment where one sees 'reality as it really is', a glimpse into the Real. It is thus about a process of embarking upon the possibility of absurdity responses that more directly engage with the absurdities themselves, rather than continuing hypernormalization to be effective. Various scholars have engaged with this question, including Camus himself when he spoke about 'embracing absurdity' and defying absurdity through the creative act. Rebellion against absurdity is a necessity that manifests not merely as an act of resistance, but firstly as a process of understanding, of reflection upon the more hidden and unconscious aspects of absurdity, such as the Real that infuses a more traumatic insight into absurdity, whereby it fully exposes the tragic and dangerous nature of absurdity. Fantasy disintegrates into despair, creating a situation of ontological insecurity, explaining the observed symptoms such as alienation (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021) or depression (Bell & Blanchflower, 2019). It may be too optimistic to call for an embracing of absurdity in such moments of clarity. While forming a necessity in unmasking absurdity (Bal, 2020), it is far from evident that the dangerous nature of absurdity (exposure) would *not* apply to the individual. Nonetheless, the absurd moment constitutes a revelation, a moment where an individual becomes aware of the absurdity present in social practice. It is an awareness of the gap between discourse and really existing practices, the slowly grown perception that authoritative discourse falls apart, has become meaningless, and that even though the discourse itself may have an appealing effect in its projected vision of fairness, dignity, and sustainability, these have disintegrated into empty signifiers that are merely misused to protect the status-quo and hegemonic order serving the elites. In that sense, this moment of revelation by definition has to counteract nothing more than the forces of instutionalization, rationalization, a lack of alternative perspectives and socialization. It is thus not surprising to see the individual profoundly being invested unconsciously in the status-quo of absurdity unawareness, and it is only when the individual breaks through all of these forces, that the absurdity may be recognized. While this creates great ontological insecurity, it is also a necessity to be able to engage in constructive rebellion. However, what should this rebellion be directed to?

Following the previous analyses, it would be tempting to argue that addressing absurdity would involve the alignment, or removal of incongruence, of authoritative discourse

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

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

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

Jameson, 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism'. The Real of capitalism (Vanheule, 2016) remains largely untouched in the present discourse around the major challenges of our society. In this sense, neoliberal capitalism remains hypernormalized, reminiscent of Thatcher's famous axiom 'There is no alternative'. Does this then mean that there is effectively no way out of absurdity or hypernormalization?

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

Accepting or embracing absurdity means to open up to the possibility of acknowledging the multilayered manifestation of social practice, the abolishment of singular truths, the acceptance of the perpetual gap between the Symbolic and the Real, between discourse and really existing practices, and the inherent limitation of absurdity disavowal. Such acceptance opens the way for alternative interpretations, the opening up of possibilities beyond normalization, beyond compliance for survival, and the necessity of escaping the predicament of the impossible paradox. Hence, this means a refusal to seek for the hypernormal as the mirror reflection of absurdity, or overengagement into normality to find some 'authentic' core to return to in uncertain times. It also involves a refusal to overinvest in rationality in the face of the dissolution of logic itself. In other words, just as fact-checking remains impotent in combatting against fake news, overreliance on rationality, reason and logic does not effectively address absurdity itself. It posits a counterpoint to absurdity, but all that can be ascertained in the mirror image of absurdity remains within the hypernormal. Instead, it is not surprising that calls have been made for a radical alternative, a third way out of the impossible paradox itself. This is what is needed in contemporary society and workplaces: not merely an attempt to address the problematic features of our socioeconomic-political structures, but to formulate a radical alternative, and find ways to contribute to achieving societal change (Bal & Brookes, 2022).

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