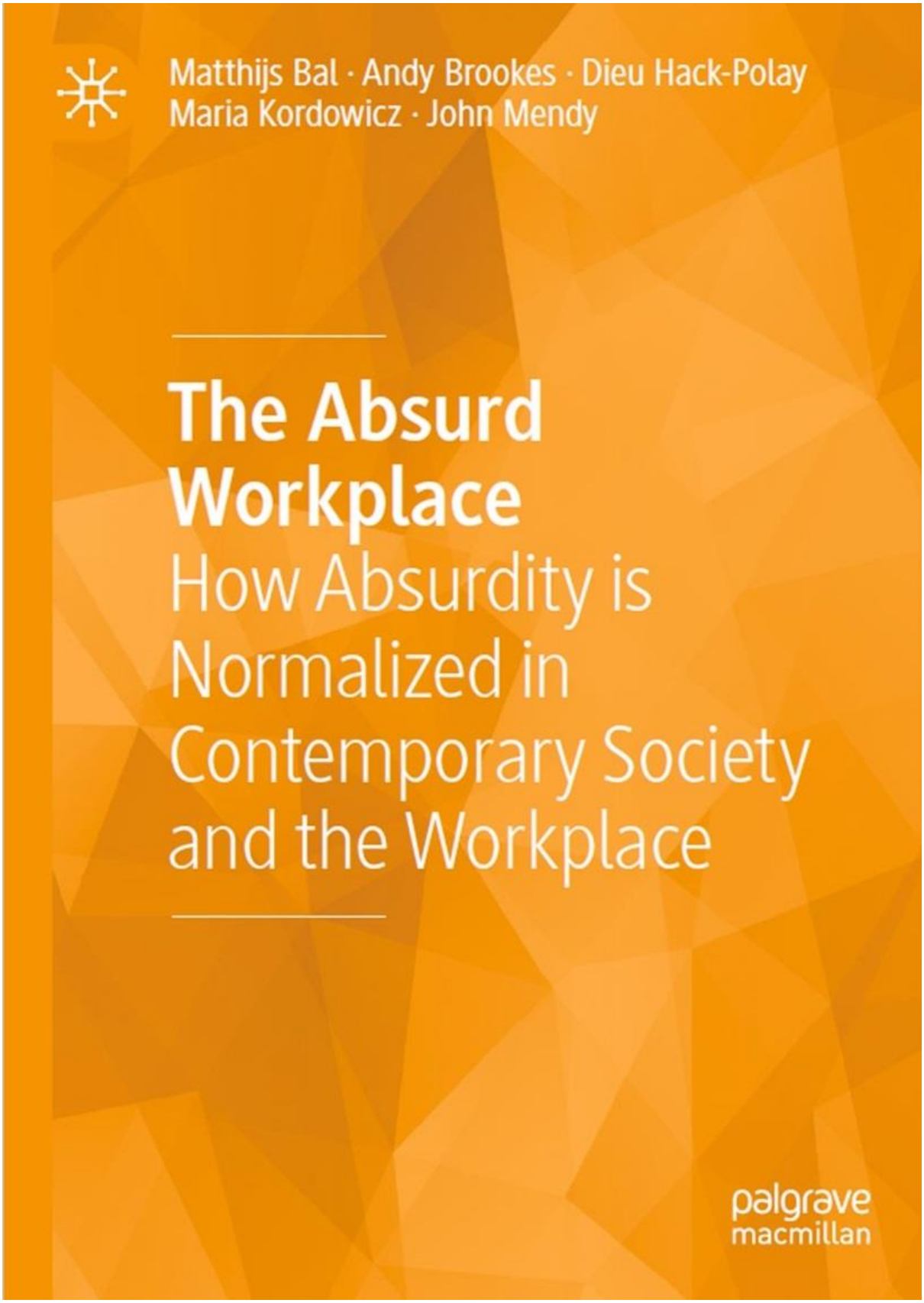
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Chapter 5: 'Chocolates for the Director' and other Tales of Public Sector Absurdity

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Abstract

This chapter fuses critical institutionalism and literary analysis, along with autobiographical autoethnographic anecdotes, to formulate an account of absurdity in the English public sector. The lesser known work of the renowned Polish satirist Sławomir Mrożek 'Chocolates for the Director' (original: "Czekoladki dla Prezesa) is explored and utilised as a framework to exemplify institutional farce. Mrożek's work encapsulated the hypernormalised 'fake world' public organisation practices typical of Soviet-era Poland and his literary style and role characterisations are studied in this chapter. The account considers the realm of bureaucratic practices and rituals in contemporary England; the author's own reflections of studying the National Health Service ethnographically and working within it and in Higher Education are drawn upon, including in the 'old normal' and the pandemic eras. The chapter stays faithful to the literary genre of absurdism and offers no solutions.

Introduction (Wstęp)

There are many methodological approaches to getting under the skin of organisational life. I consider myself an organisational ethnographer. Ethnography is a qualitative approach typically applied within the social and behavioural sciences, stemming from the field of Anthropology, enabling us to expand our understandings about how societies and groups function (e.g. Geertz, 1973). I gather rich multisource data towards my research – I interview members of organisations and teams, I analyse documents, policies and artefacts, and I observe what goes on day to day, taking ethnographic field notes. This means that I have had many opportunities to study organisations to gain a deep insight as to their functioning, their processes and people dynamics, in much the same way that anthropologists traditionally study human groups and their cultures. One of our 'tools' if you like, is our capacity for reflexivity. Reflexivity denotes the ability to take into account the impact of my presence on what I am researching and on the research process itself (see Scotford Archer, 2012). I therefore approach the writing of this chapter from the reflexive standpoint – reflecting on arguably absurd situations from my past work in the English public sector, namely the National Health Service (NHS) and Higher Education Institutions (HE) and my role within them.

There is also an element of autoethnography within this chapter in order to connect my own personal experience with my socio-cultural context. Autoethnography is conducting ethnography of self and understanding one's own self-cultural and contextual facets, utilising self-reflection, reflexivity and one's own subjective experience (see Ellis, 2004). It is therefore apt that I have chosen to draw on Sławomir Mrożek's satirical work "Chocolates for the Director" (original "Czekoladki dla Prezesa"). My formative childhood years were spent in Soviet-era Poland. I recently recollected the painful absurdity of the censorship of my mother's letters sent to 8 year old me from London with black marker. Blanked out clauses I imagine expressing her immersing herself in the bourgeois excess of the West – 'today, I visited a supermarket to find shelves filled with food'; 'I arrived at the local council offices and was served immediately with a smile'; 'I took a ride on the metro which had actually once been built' – expressions of a life in direct contrast to the absurd social and infrastructural inefficiencies of Communist Poland. Mrożek (1930-2013) was a satirist, journalist, dramatist and cartoonist. Many of his works are classified as absurdist fiction or the theatre of the absurd. This genre typically focusses on the nihilist experiences of its characters, whereby there appears to be no inherent meaning to their existence. Mrożek's characters often find themselves within absurd and incongruous scenarios, typically offering no way out and steeped in futility.

One of Mrożek's most famous works, the play "Tango" (1964), offered me a powerful lens through which to understand my early childhood experiences. I studied the work for my Polish A-Level (it did feel somewhat oxymoronic to be undertaking an English school qualification in my native tongue, studying a literary culture that was my own, and yet from an outsider's perspective – perhaps here my initiation into ethnography began). "Tango" presents us with a multi-generational household on stage (termed a microsociety by a number of literary commentators), in conflict, with Artur, a medical student, in vein attempting to establish a values-based system for organising the household. Here, the teenage me, I saw parallels with what I perceived to be the empty gestures and propaganda of Soviet Russia, and how at odds it was with my daily experience of food stamps, queueing, and the surveillance my family risked being under by being anti-Party academics – 'and remember not to talk about politics at school' heard the 7 year old me. "Tango" raised the question of whether the intellectual class as symbolised by Artur has any place in modern society. Not

long before writing this chapter, Michael Gove (a Conservative Party Minister and at the time the Secretary of State for Justice in the UK) discredited experts during the 2016 Brexit referendum with the words 'I think the people in this country have had enough of experts'.

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

Finally, but by way of an introduction, this chapter can be conceptualised both as stemming from critical institutional and literary analysis. Critical institutionalism promotes and contributes to the body of knowledge concerning institutional relational processes, the distribution and utilisation of both human and non-human resource and the institution's interrelationship with its societal context (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). I draw on autoethnographic experiences of institutional life which pertaining to these facets which are of central interest to critical institutionalism. Literary analysis scaffolds the present chapter, through the application of Sławomir Mrożek's "Chocolates for the Director" as a lens of elucidating the absurdity of institutional processes with the English public sector. As an ethnographer, my subjective experience of the work and my own personal perspectives, along with a critical evaluation of the Mrożek's work are of central interest. Each of the following sections are named after selected chapters of "Chocolates for the Director".

The Hat (Kapelusz)

My numerous Head of Programmes, Projects and Services interim management roles in the NHS entailed taking part in countless meetings. I cannot recall a meeting where the Pareto 80/20 principle had not reared its head, namely that the last 20% of the meeting was spent discussing matters holding 80% significance, whereas 80% of meeting time was spent on discussing the lesser 20% of issues. And the 20% often involved car parking or printing pitfalls. Indeed, one of the often cited concerns within the NHS is how to manage 'waste' within the system. 'Waste', according to the Chris Ham at the King's Fund (2017), can denote a number of facets of organisational life and its impact, such as 'adverse events, spending on medical procedures of low value, and the use of branded medicines when equally effective generic alternatives are available'. It was during my time with the NHS where general practitioner referrals to other NHS services began to be more actively scrutinised for their appropriateness in order to reduce 'waste' in the system. This saw

general practitioners – the medical generalist NHS ‘gatekeepers’ whose role was traditionally to support the control of healthcare expenditure through ‘authorising’ access to specialty care – being ‘gatekept’ through standardised ‘one size fits all’ criteria by externally commissioned referral management teams (Royal College of General Practitioners, 2018). Though proponents of the referral management systems argued that they offered additional ‘peer-review’ and guidance around the appropriateness of referrals, upholding quality of care and providing value for money, somewhat absurdly, the teams assessing the referrals, were often made up of the same local GPs employed at higher cost to the taxpayer by externally procured private providers making the referral decisions in the first place. Arguably, this duplicated the use of human resource, paradoxically creating wastage in the system and risking the deprofessionalisation of general practitioners (e.g. Weiss & Fitzpatrick, 1997) by their own colleagues undermining their clinical expertise in decision-making. Despite scant evidence as to their effectiveness in driving improved referrals and quality of clinical decision-making, within government policy, referral management centres were nonetheless promoted as a symbol of efficiency and cost-saving to the tax payer, driving the hypernormalisation of an inherently absurd organisational ritual.

To draw parallels with “Chocolates for the Director”, within the chapter ‘The Hat’ Sławomir Mrożek uses the hat as a symbol for a Potemkin bureaucracy – one that has an outwardly facing semblance of civility and professionalism, but merely as a Scheinian artefact (referring to Edgar Schein’s (1992) conceptualisation of organisational culture), yet one that holds no bearing on the underlying reality of institutional performance. Officials are mandated by the Director to wear the hat when making their way through the town on official business. The Director informs his workforce that he ‘purchased the hat through official funds’. The hat is described in comedic detail, as being ‘of the Borsalino make, in the shade of marengo, manufactured from the highest quality felt’ (p. 135) and kept in the Director’s wardrobe under lock and key to prevent it from getting dusty. Soon problems begin to arise, namely caused by staff having heads of different shapes and sizes. This literal ‘one size fits all’ institutional approach results in the Director receiving the following anonymous complaint from the senior clerk – ‘from a hygienic standpoint, it is my responsibility to report that the junior clerk has dandruff’ (p. 136). And so a meeting is called, though the case of the senior and junior clerk is overshadowed by a more ‘important’ 20% Pareto event, namely that the senior accountant, whilst on official business in town, was not only not wearing the hat, but was found to have been fanning himself with it. The senior accountant’s justification that he was simply hot does not excuse his wrongdoing in the eyes of the Director, for the hat remains ‘the property of the State’ (p. 137).

Figure 1: A Borsalino felt hat in the shade of marengo

Here, Mrożek elucidates several absurdities of public sector institutional life, utilising the tangible symbol of 'the hat' and hat wearing to convey the organisational façades which take up space in lieu of meaningfully contending with complex and challenging work. Further, the somewhat farcical passive aggressive reports on colleagues as in the case of dandruff, are reminiscent of the use of Datix reporting, an electronic incident reporting system, within NHS organisations. I spent several years working in forensic mental health settings, where several high-risk events, including the assault of my team member by another staff member within a forensic unit, mandated the completion of an online Datix form. No matter how 'objectively' serious the incident I was reporting had been, never had I received a response from the 'higher ups' as to next steps nor how learning would be generated from the incident towards the prevention of future issues. It was as if 'Datixing' (yes, the new verb 'to Datix' has entered the NHS vernacular) had become an end in itself rather than the means to an end it was designed to be. 'Just put it on Datix' I was often told. This apparently universal advice then led to insurmountable volumes of Datix incident reporting within the NHS Trust. Further, the Datix process has been 'exposed' on Twitter by Shaun Lintern (2020), health journalist for The Independent, as being weaponised through its use to attack colleagues and other professional groups[1]. Indeed, a mixed methods study of national patient safety incident

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

report in Datix carried out by Cooper and colleagues (2017) revealed that 45% of reports attributed blame to an individual, potentially reflecting an organisational culture in health which leads to retribution, rather than one of learning, along with 'a failure to appreciate the contribution of system factors', undermining the original purpose of the incident reporting system, namely to generate learning from incidents about how to avoid them in the future.

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

Mrożek's chapter 'The Hat' ends with the Director being spotted wearing the Bolsarino on a Sunday, in direct contravention of his own policy. He is spotted by one of his employees who is left with the dilemma of whether to 'say "hi" or pretend that he hasn't seen him' (p. 137). We can draw parallels here with the 'Catch-22' or a 'no-win dilemma' of Datix as a feature of NHS institutional life. The term 'Catch-22' refers to the Joseph Heller's (1961) satirical literary work bearing the same title, where the absurdity of military life and war are unpicked, through the attempts of the central character to complete the demands of military service to be able to return home, which are marked by their futility and paradoxical trappings with no apparent way out. Therefore, does the current application of the Datix system mean staff finding themselves in the dilemma of filling out a Datix form and risk producing more work for themselves with no clear resolution, or do they pass the incident by? In true absurd style, the employee in "Chocolates for the Director" says 'hi' to the hat-wearing Director, but does so whilst pretending that he hasn't seen him.

Wolves (Wilki)

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

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

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

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

It can therefore be argued that our search for meaning in a meaningless world in itself gives rise to absurdity. This puts us in a Godotian pattern of behaviour, whereby we repeat routines and rituals, which in essence have no culmination, driven only by a vain unrealised hope for the arrival of the new. 'Godotian' relates to "Waiting for Godot", a play by Samuel Beckett which debuted in 1953, the tragicomic poet, playwright and novelist, often seen as one of the key figures in absurdist theatre. "Waiting for Godot" features two caricatured figures, Vladimir and Estragon, engaging in seemingly meaningless and frustrating discussions and encounters, while waiting for Godot to arrive. Godot does not arrive, highlighting the futility of Vladimir and Estragon's ritualistic behaviours as they endure their pointless wait.

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

As previously mentioned, a notable facet of the HE pandemic organisational response was that empty performance and work volume and output metrics proliferated more than ever. My own PhD was an ethnographic study of general practices in England that had been

labelled as poor performing as a result of their scores on a pay for performance quality improvement scheme called the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QoF) introduced in the early 2000s (Kordowicz, 2016). My thesis was a critical commentary on the limitations of numerical targets as a lens for assessing quality of care and here I was being mandated to evidence measurable activity above meaningful and nuanced scholarship. Within "Chocolates for the Director" a meeting is called to discuss the submitted case of poor staff punctuality as to whether another meeting ought to be called to discuss staff punctuality. The meeting to discuss staff punctuality is then called and new punctuality targets set. We observe Mrożek utilising the literary device absurdity to convey the irrationality of performance targets in the workplace. For a review of target 'gaming' or manipulation in the Soviet bloc see Christopher Hood's work (2006), which we then applied to the distortion of performance achievement in primary care (Kordowicz & Ashworth, 2010). The workers, suitably impressing the Director, set even more and more ambitious targets for themselves until they decide to begin work at 4am, becoming caught in the enactment and hypernormalisation of ever more absurd workplace behaviour.

The comedic is rarely far from the tragic. As colleagues in HE passed away from COVID-19, their obituary circular emails contained disclaimers assuring other staff that 'there is no evidence to indicate that they contracted COVID-19 whilst undertaking work at the university'. It became clear that fears of litigation and students claiming back their fees, rather than public health and human compassion concerns, became the main driving forces underpinning the HE top down pandemic response. Like Artur in Mrożek's "Tango", I felt demoralised, disempowered by the systemic structures I found myself part of, and could no longer fit many of my own values into much of my teaching work. To add insult to injury, Michelle Donelan, who served as Minister of State for Higher and Further Education during the pandemic lockdowns, would demonstrate continued disdain for lecturers 'refusing' to teach students in person despite evidence-based public health pandemic control measures. She also highlighted the 'deeply irresponsible' University and College (trade) Union calling for strikes to improve the working conditions of university workers. As my colleagues were working all hours to support their students while tending to their caring responsibilities at home during lockdowns, I still recall reading Donelan's virtue signalling tweets in total disbelief as representing an HE context that for me working within the HE context did not exist. In a similar vein, my ethnographic research at the time exploring a general practice quality improvement scheme, captured the camaraderie, adaptability, hard work and patient-centredness of general practitioners, at what was for many the most challenging time of their careers. And yet here is a 2020 headline from The Telegraph: 'lazy doctors are using Covid-19 as an excuse to not see us[4]' – 'yes, to prevent the spread of a deadly virus' I screamed into the ether. The NHS is facing the worst staffing crisis in its history due to continuous underfunding, poor long term workforce planning, and Brexit, including exceptionally high rates of staff burnout, turnover and low morale, and the media and Secretary of State for Health continued to malign and scapegoat general practitioners to the point of farce.

Further, recruitment and promotion freezes across the HE sector during the initial waves of the pandemic in England contributed to my colleagues fearing for their professional futures and adopting a 'head down' strategy, becoming pawns within the tsunami of feverish faux productivity. Though from a non HE context, a PhD study of hiring freezes (supposedly a strategy to improve organisational functioning) within the mining industry (Nzuza, 2020), demonstrates the extent of their negative impact on worker behaviours and therefore on the

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

organisation itself - causing a ‘distortion of work roles, overworking of the employees, employee dissatisfaction, low morale, low motivation, and negative attitude about the organisation.’ I certainly conveyed these attitudes at the time. Conversely, during Poland’s Soviet era, everyone had a job. My granddad said to six year old me that this is why the Warsaw metro won’t get built unless we have a democracy and explained that this is why I would on my daily walk to school I would spot workmen sitting around drinking vodka. The Polish saying goes – ‘czy się stoi, czy się leży, dwa tysiące się należy’ (‘whether you’re standing up or lying down you’re entitled to your two thousand’ – I promise the prosody of the Polish language original has greater comedic impact!), indicating that no matter the quality of your contributions at work, you would get paid, due to the guaranteed income within Soviet bloc Poland. It turns out that the menacing sound of wolves was simply the growling of a colleague’s stomach after eating too many cornichons. Nonetheless, he not only comes away with his life in tact, but also an unprecedented cash bonus.

The Lift (Winda)

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

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